

# HOME CINEMA

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## Choice



### REVIEWS

Loewe Bild 3  
55in 4K TV  
BenQ Full HD PJ  
Piega TMicro  
5.1 system  
Epson EH-LS100  
KEF Kube10b  
subwoofer

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### DX-2 divas

Wharfedale rewrites the sub/sat rulebook

### Why Hollywood loves OLED

Making Marvel magic with Panasonic

**INSIDE** BUYER'S GUIDE → READERS' SYSTEMS → AUDYSSEY MULTEQ APP  
→ NETFLIX VS CINEMA → BLUE PLANET II 4K BD → SENNHEISER 3D SOUNDBAR

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# HOME CINEMA Choice

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# Welcome

There's no hard and fast rule about how much you should spend on your home cinema hobby. Naturally, the size of your room has a big impact, as there's no point cramming a 120in projector screen into a snug



media den, or hoping a 40in flatscreen can stand out in a dedicated loft conversion. And there are your specific needs, aesthetic tastes and own budget to consider.

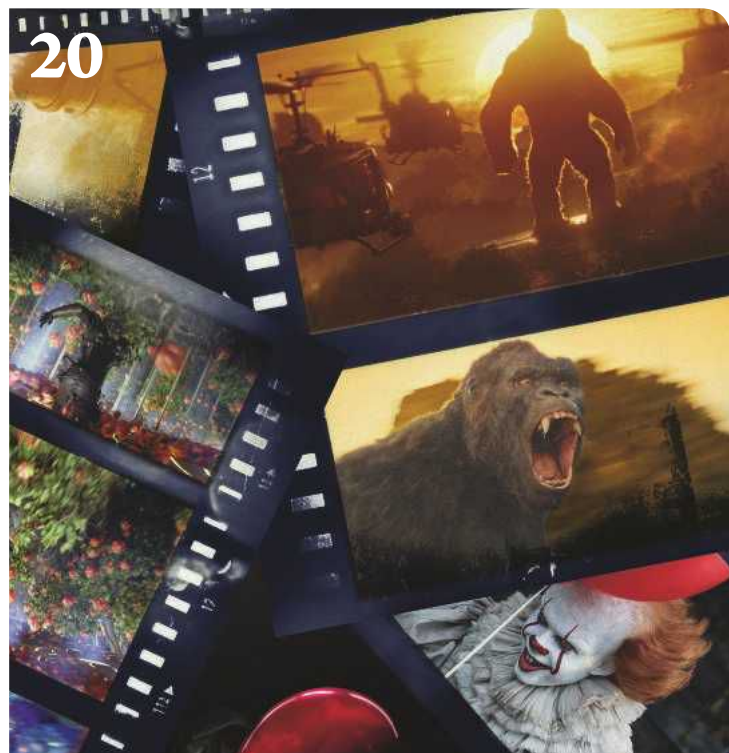
All this explains why HCC is equally happy reviewing £15,000 projectors, such as our Sony cover star (see p38), and entry-level speaker packages like Wharfedale's £450 DX-2 (p52). **Both are excellent products, just aimed at vastly different buyers** – but buyers who share a love of movies.

Speaking of movies, the first of this year's 'Summer' blockbusters are actually only weeks away. For fans of franchise flicks, 2018 has plenty in store. So however much you spend on your home cinema, keep some money aside for Blu-rays!

*Mark Craven*  
Editor



# MENU



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**John Archer:**  
The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer



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**Danny Phillips:**  
A former editor of *What Video* magazine, now a certified home cinema audio buff

## FEATURES

In-depth interviews and special reports. Starts... p20

**COVER STORY**

### 20 Demo delights

Team HCC picks the Blu-ray and 4K platters that will push your system to the limits

**COVER STORY**

### 25 Blockbuster OLED TVs make the grade

Discover why Panasonic's latest TVs have been given the Hollywood seal of approval

### 32 Bigscreen playroom

Inside the ultimate entertainment space

### 86 Certified: AV-Holic

Two more HCC readers show off their setups

## SELECT

The place to look if you're planning to buy some new AV gear. Starts... p111

### 111 Gear guide

HCC's comprehensive Top 10s list only the very best kit money can buy

## BULLETIN

The place for hot products, trends and technology. Starts... p7

### 07 Sony's surprise

4K disc spinner primed for Dolby Vision

### 08 13 is lucky for some

Denon unveils class-leading AV amplifier

### 09 Ambeo 3D comes home

Sennheiser prepares for soundbar launch

### 10 A new wave of TV tech

Rollable OLED and 8K displays among the innovations coming from TV manufacturers

### 12 God Particle goes VOD

Netflix gobbles up *Cloverfield* three-quel

### 14 Ragnarok 'n' roll!

Thor brings the thunder to Ultra HD Blu-ray

### 16 Back of the 'net

Trailers and tech to check out on the web

### 17 Return of the Master

NAD refreshes flagship Masters Series lineup

## REGULARS

Whether you want our opinions or your own, here's where to look. Starts... p77

### 77 Digital Copy

Mark Craven ties himself in knots over home cinema's addiction to cables

### 78 Film Fanatic

The Beek wants a word with Sony Pictures

### 80 In the Mix

As HDR gets more complex, Jon Thompson worries that 'black' is under attack

### 82 Feedback

Share your thoughts with other AV addicts

### 122 AV Avenger

Artificial Intelligence isn't always what it's cracked up to be, insists Steve May

## COMPETITIONS

### 85 Great discs to be won!

*Paddington 2*, *The Death of Stalin*, *Jigsaw 4K* and *Attack on Titan: Season 2*





**44**

'The TMicro system is nimble on its feet and punches above its weight'



**38**



**52**



**56**



**58**

## REVIEWS

With a focus on performance, these are in-depth tests you can trust... p37

### COVER STORY

#### 38 High End Hero: Sony VPL-VW760ES

Native 4K HDR laser projector raises the performance bar for home cinema

#### 44 Piega TMicro 5.1

Add a touch of style to your system with this classy and slender floorstanding array

#### 48 BenQ W1050

Enjoy bigscreen home cinema on a budget with BenQ's sub-£500 Full HD projector

### COVER STORY

#### 52 Wharfedale DX-2

Compact 5.1 speaker system delivers superb surround sound at an affordable price

#### 56 Epson EH-LS100

Ultra-short-throw laser projector serves up bright and colourful 1080p imagery

### COVER STORY

#### 58 JBL Bar 5.1

Range-topping soundbar/subwoofer system with wireless multichannel skills

#### 62 Audyssey MultEQ Editor

Acoustic calibration tool gets app expansion

#### 64 Loewe Bild 3.55

Entry-level 55in designer 4K OLED TV

#### 66 IMore H1707

Unconventional over-ear headphones

#### 66 Sonoro Meisterstück

All-in-one music system wants to do it all

#### 67 KEF Kube10b

Revised 300W sealed-box subwoofer

#### 68 Grouptest: Headphone amps

We rate the Arcam rHead, Heed CanAmp MkII, Oppo HA-1 and SPL Phonitor X to see which will best aid your late-night listening

#### 74 Long-term test: Velodyne DD18+

This monster subwoofer is still a perfect fit for largescale cinema rooms

## PLAYBACK



The latest Blu-rays, DVDs and videogames reviewed and rated. Starts... p93

- 94 Kingsman: The Golden Circle [4K]
- 95 Murder on the Orient Express  
Brimstone  
Batman: Gotham by Gaslight  
The Death of Stalin
- 96 Paddington 2 [4K]
- 98 Monster Hunter: World; Starship Troopers: Traitor of Mars; Attack on Titan: Season 2; Brawl in Cell Block 99
- 99 Blue Planet II [4K]
- 100 Blade Runner 2049 [4K]; American Made [4K]; Something Wild; Loving Vincent; Ice Cold in Alex: 60th Anniversary Edition
- 102 Night of the Living Dead
- 103 Jigsaw; Jeepers Creepers 3; Flatliners; The Ritual; Thelma
- 104 Wolf Warrior II
- 105 The LEGO Ninjago Movie; House; Monster Hunt; The Housemaid
- 106 Quantum Leap: The Complete Collection  
Charley Varrick  
Blue Collar  
The Witches
- 108 **COLLECTING...** All aboard!  
Ride the AV rails with 10 of the best train-based movies on Blu-ray



# Stars of the Silver screen

## NEW Silver Series

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# BULLETIN

→ **NEWS HIGHLIGHTS** **DENON** 13-channel power amp ready to drive Atmos setups **SENNHEISER** Sonic specialist debuts 3D audio soundbar solution **NETFLIX** VOD giant scoops up Cloverfield sequel **WEBWATCH** Trailers and tech from around the 'net **NEWS X10** The hottest news stories in bite-sized chunks **THOR: RAGNAROK** Another Marvel-lous Blu-ray? **& MORE!**

## Sony's surprise

Sony UBP-X700 → [www.sony.co.uk](http://www.sony.co.uk)



Sony announced the UBP-X700 at CES in January, and has wasted no time getting this 4K disc-spinner into shops. Smaller than its higher-end brethren, it also misses out on hi-res audio certification and DVD-A playback, but commands a tempting £270 price tag. Perhaps most importantly, the UBP-X700 is billed as the company's first player to support Dolby Vision HDR, although this feature will only go live in Summer 2018 after a firmware update.

### HCC ONLINE...

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# 13 is lucky for some

Denon AVC-X8500H → [www.denon.co.uk](http://www.denon.co.uk)

Although described by Denon as an AV amplifier rather than a receiver (due to the omission of an FM/AM tuner), the new AVC-X8500H looks suited to being the one-box hub of your high-end cinema room – particularly as its discrete monolithic amplifier stage extends to 13 channels, enabling 7.2.4 setups and beyond. This class-leading spec is joined by 4K HDR passthrough over HDMI, Audyssey MultEQ XT32 calibration, Alexa 'Smart Home' skills, network streaming and the promise of a (paid) upgrade path to HDMI 2.1 in the future. Price is TBC.





## Docking in Orbit



New from British audio specialist Orbitsound is its Dock E30, a £400 Bluetooth/Wi-Fi speaker (also with

physical 3.5mm and optical inputs) that incorporates the company's Airsound spatial imaging technology to promise a pristine stereo image from any listening position – boosting bass is a trio of woofers. Features include a device docking 'groove', USB-C charging port, multiroom support, and streaming service integration through Orbitsound's app. [www.orbitsound.com](http://www.orbitsound.com)

## The art of low-end noise



Stealth Acoustics has introduced a new passive subwoofer in its Image III on-wall speaker range.

The Image III SUB employs dual 8in drivers inside a low-profile 368(w) x 711(h) x 83(d)mm cabinet and promises a bass response down to 35Hz. The sub ships with a Satin White finish, but Stealth says its design allows for varied customisation possibilities – including the brand's factory laminated Image Wraps, which can be used to turn the woofer into a work of art. [www.stealthacoustics.com](http://www.stealthacoustics.com)

# Ambeo 3D comes home

Sennheiser plans to rewrite the rulebook for soundbar technology

Sennheiser has unveiled its first soundbar, albeit in prototype form at the recent CES show, and it's an absolute doozy. Using the brand's proprietary Ambeo 3D processing technology, the prototype features 13 drivers arranged in a forward-facing, side-angled and upfiring configuration.

Unlike many rival home theatre soundbars, this doesn't use a wireless subwoofer, because Sennheiser claims it can drop down to 30Hz unaided. That said, if you insist on adding a subwoofer, then that'll be possible too, we're told.

Sennheiser has been refining Ambeo for a number of years, but until now it's largely restricted the tech to commercial projects. This soundbar could change all that, taking Ambeo from studio codec to a universal processing format.

Given the early nature of the preview, there's no confirmation yet on final design or connectivity. However, an early listen left us astounded at just how immersive an experience it offers.

Demonstrated in a small, square listening room, the Ambeo prototype uses sonic reflections to construct its soundstage, and requires microphone-aided calibration to set up, the distance of walls and

ceiling being critical. In time-honoured fashion, the supplied mic is placed at the listening position, and the soundbar then adjusts its output based on the room characteristics.

## Plenty of potential

The Sennheiser 'bar is compatible with Dolby Atmos and MPEG-H (a newer 3D audio codec). It decodes the relevant bitstream, and then interprets it with Ambeo processing. It can also upmix standard 5.1 and two-channel sources.

Sennheiser describes this as the first single-box soundbar able to deliver 5.1.4 Dolby Atmos, and it might not be an outrageous boast. It seems to place objects above and beyond the listening position.

To showcase its potential, the company played music from a live performance by Imogen Heap, alongside more familiar Dolby Atmos demo material. It's not uncommon for traditional Atmos soundbars to create a wide, high soundstage, but recreating the kind of overhead and wraparound effects that a multi-speaker sound system can offer is rare. The Ambeo had no such problem. The speaker was also able to drop deep notes and offer reassuring slam.

The company says its design aim was to replicate the performance of the first multi-speaker Ambeo 3D playback system, which actually used a 9.1 array and cost a small fortune to equip. On the evidence of this sample, it's not too far off the mark. It's too early to tell if the Ambeo 'bar is genuinely musical in stereo mode, or really cuts the mustard with an action-orientated movie, but the early signs are good.

We've no news on a launch date (although Sennheiser says it will come to market before the end of 2018) or final feature set, but we're already counting the days until we can give one a thorough work out. Pricing has also yet to be announced, although the company makes no bones that this is a premium product. Time to start saving then...



The soundbar uses 13 drivers across four of its panels

## Playlist...

Team HCC spins up its disc picks of the month

### Dunkirk (Ultra HD BD)

Its use of HDR may be fairly subtle, but this 4K outing for Christopher Nolan's acclaimed WWII drama uncovers a wealth of fine detail in the film's 65mm/IMAX footage.



### The Fortune (All-region BD)



Fans of Jack Nicholson and Warren Beatty will find plenty to enjoy about Indicator's Blu-ray release of this 1975 period comedy.

### Shin Godzilla (Region B BD)



Political satire and city-stomping monster mayhem collide in this surprisingly smart reboot of the classic Japanese creature-feature.

### Atomic Blonde (Ultra HD BD)



A colour-saturated Dolby Vision encode ensures this stylish thriller looks the business in 4K.

### God's Own Country (Region B BD)



A gorgeous hi-def showcase for the stark beauty of Francis Lee's award-winning British drama.

## At the 'plex...

Heading out to see a flick?  
Catch these this month

### I, Tonya

**February 23:** Critics have been raving about Margot Robbie's performance as disgraced figure skater Tonya Harding in this biting biopic. Find out why she landed Best Actress nods at the BAFTAs and Oscars when *I, Tonya* skates into cinemas across the UK.

### Red Sparrow



**March 07:** Jennifer Lawrence stars alongside Joel Egerton, Jeremy Irons and Charlotte Rampling in this thriller about a Russian intelligence officer who falls for the CIA officer she has been tasked with exposing.

### Tomb Raider



**March 16:** Taking its lead from the 2013 videogame reboot, this new *Tomb Raider* film charts Lara Croft (Alicia Vikander)'s first expedition. Will this be the film to finally break the movie-to-game curse. You can find out from today.

# A new wave of TV tech

Rollable OLED, 8K TV and laser projectors herald next-gen revolution

**A new wave of display technologies are threatening to change the way we all watch TV. Ultra-short-throw 4K laser projectors aim to create a new home cinema niche, rollable OLEDs want to hide in your living room, and bright 8K displays promise a glorious HDR future. All these innovations took their bow at the recent CES tech expo in Las Vegas.**

The best example of nascent 8K tech could be found on the Sony stand, where its 85in Full LED prototype dazzled with 10,000-nit brightness and a new iteration of the brand's proprietary image processor, dubbed the X1 Ultimate.

A FALD (Full Array Local Dimming) display, this astonishing panel exhibited supreme, naturalistic peak brightness and outrageous fine detail. While some will argue that there's little need for a 10,000-nit beacon like this, the benefits of X1 Ultimate seem far more immediate – Sony demonstrated the uprated silicon on a 4K HDR OLED screen, with alluring results. Comparisons with the company's existing X1 Extreme chipper showed finer detail and greater contrast. Currently, there's no news on retail products with the processor. Perhaps an IFA 2018 unveil of X1 Ultimate hardware is on the cards?

Not to be outdone by Sony's processing prowess, LG Display startled attendees with a 65in rollable OLED screen, which pops up from a (sizable) housing

when required. The panel, mounted on a segmented backing, was able to unfold like a garage door.

Cleverly, the height of this rollable OLED screen is selectable. It can extend into a conventional 16:9 TV, or can also unfurl just enough to create a CinemaScope-style 21:9 display. It remains to be seen if the idea gains traction; regular readers may recall LG's previous OLED TV novelty that could curve or flatten at the touch of a button.

### Laser projection

Of course, 8K behemoths and rollerblind tellies will not be for everyone, and manufacturers continue to espouse that an ultra-short-throw laser projector, and expanse of white wall, can be a less intrusive (and possibly less expensive) solution for a futuristic entertainment space.

At CES, Hisense previewed a 150in 4K addition to its Laser TV line, which impressed with its authentic black levels, and is expected to launch in the US late this year. Sony, meanwhile, upped the glamour stakes with

its \$30,000 (approx) LSPX-A1. Part of its LifeSpace UX range of lifestyle products, this looks like designer furniture, but casts a bright 4K HDR picture and sports a glass tube speaker driver design.

**Sony shows off its X1 Ultimate chip (top) and laser projector (bottom)**



# Orange is the new black

New Monitor Audio speakers marry striking design with tempting price tags

**With eye-catching orange MMP II driver cones, Monitor Audio's new speaker family hopes to bring a playful, contemporary twist to an otherwise straightforward aesthetic.**

However, the appeal of the brand's new Monitor Series is more than skin deep. Price tags are appealing, while C-CAM dome tweeters and HiVe II port technology filter down from the company's step-up Bronze series.

The baby speaker in the lineup is the compact (and square) Monitor 50 (£160-per-pair), which partners its C-CAM tweeter with a 5.5in MMP II midbass driver; a larger, traditionally shaped

bookshelf model, the Monitor 100 (£200 p/p), uses a 6.5in midbass unit.

Joining these are the Monitor 200 floorstander (£400 p/p, 5.5in bass driver and 5.5in midrange); Monitor 300 (£550 p/p, dual 6.5in bass drivers and single 5.5in midrange); two-way Monitor C150 centre (£140); and the Monitor MRW-10 subwoofer (£350), which features a 10in woofer (not orange, though...) and 100W Class D amplifier.

All six models are available in Black, White or Walnut finishes. [www.monitораudio.com](http://www.monitораudio.com)

**The Monitor Series' affordability means a floorstander 5.1 system can be assembled for around £1,050**







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## Extras...

Small items that could make a big impression...

### The Shape of Water: Creating a Fairy Tale for Troubled Times



This awesome book is the perfect companion to Guillermo del Toro's award-

winning fantasy *The Shape of Water*. Taking in everything from the impact that a screening of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* had on a six-year-old del Toro, to in-depth character bios and a look at the creation of the film's VFX, this beautifully illustrated book leaves no stone unturned. Pick up a copy for £35.

### The Last Jedi: First Order Stormtrooper Executioner Helmet



One of several new additions to prop replica specialist Anovos's 'Premier

Line' of *Star Wars* goodies, this ready-to-wear Stormtrooper Executioner fibreglass helmet has been meticulously scanned and sculpted to perfectly replicate the versions seen in *The Last Jedi*, and will cost you around £600.

### The Last Jedi – Incredible Cross-Sections



Sticking with *Star Wars*, this slim, oversized hardback shines its light on the

vehicles from the latest sequel. Across its 48 pages you can ogle cross-section illustrations for 13 craft, including a suitably large fold-out centrefold of Supreme Leader Snoke's Mega-Destroyer. Available for £16.



*The Cloverfield Paradox*  
– available now  
via Netflix

# God Particle goes VOD

Paramount/Netflix deal for *Cloverfield* sequel that bypasses cinema

If you needed further evidence that the traditional theatrical movie business model is under pressure from streaming platforms, look no further than the recent deal between Paramount Pictures and Netflix concerning *The Cloverfield Paradox*.

An announcement during the halftime break in the Superbowl on Feb 4 confirmed that Paramount had signed over its sci-fi sequel to the global streaming giant. In a surprise move, the film was available to view as the football game ended.

*The Cloverfield Paradox*, which previously went by the title *God Particle*, had been due a theatrical release in April. Another film set within the *Cloverfield* 'universe' – 2016's *10 Cloverfield Lane* – did make it into cinemas, earning around \$70m in the US.

The capture of *The Cloverfield Paradox*, for an undisclosed sum, follows in the wake of news that distribution rights to Alex Garland's forthcoming sci-fi thriller *Annihilation* in some territories have also been sold by Paramount to Netflix. Garland's sophomore directorial effort, following his debut *Ex Machina*, will reach cinemas in the US, Canada and China soon, but in the UK and Europe will be a Netflix exclusive.

In recent years, Netflix has expanded its business model to include feature film content. Yet having started with its original commissions (Idris Elba vehicle *Beasts of No Nation*, Will Smith sci-fi/fantasy *Bright*, various Adam Sandler comedies), the corp is now acquiring content – previously produced with a cinema release in mind – from elsewhere.

## Box office battle

Paramount Pictures' decisions regarding *Annihilation* and *The Cloverfield Paradox* are perhaps due to the studio being in a state of transition – a new CEO, Jim Gianopulos, took control in April last year. Furthermore, it has been on a losing run at the box office, outgunned by the likes of



Warner Bros., Universal and Walt Disney. Only two of Paramount's 2017 releases (*Transformers: The Last Knight* and *Daddy's Home 2*) earned more than \$100m at US cinemas. Its *Monster Trucks*, *Baywatch* and *Ghost in the Shell* properties are considered flops.

Perhaps faced with the prospect of more disappointing returns from two mid-budget sci-fi movies, the studio felt

a guaranteed return from a Netflix cheque was a sensible move, leaving it to focus on promoting its 2018 franchise movies, *Transformers* spin-off *Bumblebee* and *Mission: Impossible – Fallout*.

Nor is it the only studio apparently seeing the appeal of the 'straight-to-Netflix model'. New Line Cinema's *Son of Shaft* (starring both Samuel L. Jackson and original *Shaft* actor Richard Roundtree, and due later this year) has become a joint production deal with the VOD platform. Netflix is covering a rumoured 50 per cent of the film's budget in exchange for international streaming rights two weeks after its US cinema release.

So consumers used to anticipating studio movies hitting cinemas may have to accept that times are changing, as will the creatives themselves. As Alex Garland said in an interview with *Collider* once *Annihilation*'s Netflix deal had been announced: 'We made the film for cinema... From my point of view and the collective of the people who made it – [it was made] to be seen on a bigscreen.'

And then there are home cinema fans. As no Netflix original movie has yet seen the light of day on DVD or Blu-ray, this same fate may hit *The*

*Cloverfield Paradox*. Nor is it yet known if *Annihilation* will eventually receive a UK disc release.

So if you've been put off getting a Netflix subscription until now, it might be the time to reconsider.

***Bumblebee* is one of Paramount Pictures' big hopes for 2018**





## This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



**1 Stick around with Now TV**  
Sky has introduced what it claims is 'the UK's cheapest streaming stick.' The Roku-powered Now TV Smart Stick ships with a remote control offering voice skills and will set you back just £15. Alternately, you can pick up a bundle of the Smart Stick and a two-month Entertainment Pass for £20, a one-month Sky Cinema Pass for £20 or a one-month Sky Sports Pass for £30. While image quality is currently restricted to 720p, Sky plans to introduce the option of streaming Now TV both live and on-demand in 1080p by the end of the year.

**2 Sky gets WB movies sooner**  
In further Sky-related news, the satcaster has inked a new deal with Warner Bros. Sky says that the deal will see the studio's new blockbusters premiere on Sky Cinema sooner than ever before, as well as the creation of dedicated channels for film franchises including *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *Mad Max* and DC Comics.

**3 Virgin offers free upgrade**  
Virgin Media is giving existing customers of its TV, broadband and phone bundles a free upgrade to its next-gen 4K V6 box, without affecting their current contracts. Virgin Media will be contacting eligible customers directly with details on how to apply for the switch-up.

**4 Foxy award winners**  
Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment is celebrating awards season by re-releasing 19 award-winning films on Blu-ray and DVD with special edition packaging. *Titanic*, *Braveheart* and *The Revenant* are among the titles included.

**5 Seaside Marvels**  
Madame Tussauds is bringing the super-powered stars of the Marvel films and comics to Blackpool from March. Spread across a previously undeveloped 5,500 square foot space, Madame Tussauds Blackpool claims that the new £1m attraction will allow visitors to 'step right into the action and come face-to-face with their favourite comic book and film heroes.'

**6 'None more black'**  
To celebrate the fifth anniversary of its LS50, KEF has launched a special Black Edition. Living up to its name, the premium active speaker boasts a black Uni-Q driver and a matte black trim ring. Even its terminals are plated with black chrome, and each speaker comes with a diamond-cut deco plate with unique serial number. It's available now, priced £800 per pair.

**7 Epson goes native**  
Epson has taken the wrapper off its first ever native 4K projector. But don't expect the EB-L12000Q to turn up on a shelf at your local Curry's, as the brand has chosen to enter 'the world of ultra-detailed projection' with a laser unit designed for commercial installations, armed with tricks including portrait-ratio projection and edge-blending for super-large presentations.

**8 4K sales up**  
Figures released by BASE (British Association for Screen Entertainment) reveal a 279 per cent year-on-year growth for Ultra HD Blu-ray sales. *Planet Earth II* was the UK's biggest-selling 4K disc in 2017, while *Dunkirk* managed to nab the number four spot in just two weeks with more than 16,000 sales.

**9 Rest in peace**  
HCC is sorry to report that Colin Lomax, a legend of the UK home entertainment industry, passed away at the end of 2017. Lomax got his start at VCI in the mid-'80s and went on to play key roles at Polygram and Universal, before turning around the fortunes of Manga Entertainment as its managing director since 2016.

**10 Tough times for UK indies**  
Several UK Blu-ray distributors are facing a tricky future following Curzon Artificial Eye's decision to shutter its Fusion Media Sales arm and bring sales in-house. The closure of Fusion has left other distributors it handled (including *Shameless* and *Third Window Films*) needing new partners to deliver upcoming releases they've already acquired rights for.



## Premiere...

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

### RoboCop to return?



*RoboCop* scribe Ed Neumeier has revealed that he's been writing a direct sequel to the original 1987 film. 'It's a continuation really of the first movie... So it's a little bit more of the old-school thing,' he told reporters at the Barbados Independent Film Festival.

### Game (almost) over

HBO has confirmed that fans won't be getting any new episodes of *Game of Thrones* this year. Filming on the fantasy saga's final batch of six episodes began late 2017 and is scheduled to continue throughout 2018, leaving the production team with a four-month turnaround period before an expected April 2019 broadcast date.

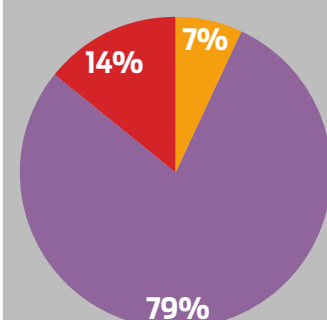
### Give us a Clue...

Ryan Reynolds will produce and star in a reboot of *Clue* (based on the board game better known as *Cluedo* on these shores) as part of a three-year, first-look deal between the actor's production company Maximum Effort and Fox.

## We asked...

### How do you generally buy your Blu-rays?

- Pre-order as early as possible
- Browse what's in the shops
- Wait for sales/special offers



Results from [www.homecinemachoice.com](http://www.homecinemachoice.com)  
Go online for more polling action





# Ragnarok 'n' roll!

Thor: Ragnarok → Walt Disney Home Entertainment  
→ DVD/Blu-ray/3D Blu-ray/Ultra HD Blu-ray

This third solo outing for Marvel's God of Thunder shakes things up by sending Thor on a colourful cosmic adventure loaded with action, humour and several familiar faces from the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

*Thor: Ragnarok* makes its disc debut on February 26 and, although advance copies weren't made available, we can confirm that the 4K version boasts Atmos audio, while Blu-ray extras include a chat-track, deleted/extended scenes and six featurettes (including a trawl back across the first 10 years of the MCU). Look for a full review in an upcoming issue...





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## Face to Face

Topics of discussion on the HCC Facebook page

### On rumours of a Last Jedi 4K Blu-ray...



A March 27 release date for the DVD/BD/4K debut of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* has been leaked by a new ad for US retailer Best Buy...  
*Team HCC*

I'll buy it just to burn it! (And I don't mean 'burn' in the parlance of our group, I mean petrol, matches and an upcoming YouTube video 'burn'...)  
*Richard Farrer*

March? And the 3D copy gets released in December, right?  
*Paul Stack*

### What you're watching on your home cinema...



*What the Peeper Saw* and *Night of the Bloody Apes* are planned so far. After that, who knows?

*Alan Hoare*

*Kingsman* (one and two).  
*Robi Lee*

*Moana* to start, and once the kids are in bed, *Kingsman: The Golden Circle* or *American Assassin*.  
*Mark Jones*

*Blade Runner*. Then *Blade Runner 2049*. Both in their 4K guises. But first *The Grand Tour* on Amazon.  
*Chris Sayles*

*Blade Runner 2049* then I'll start ploughing through the MCU before *Avengers: Infinity War*.  
*John Dennis*

18 Marvel movies in 12 weeks (including a visit to the cinema for *Black Panther*)? Sounds like a plan. We might join you...  
*Team HCC*

I'll be watching the time – counting down to the release of *Thor: Ragnarok* on Blu-ray.  
*Del Palmer*



**Join in the fun**

Like our page at facebook.com/HomeCinemaChoice

# Back of the 'net

Trailers, technology and more to check out on the web



## Between The Rock and a hard place

With just a touch of *Die Hard* about it, Universal's flick *Skyscraper* casts Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson as an ex-army security guard doing his best to protect his family (and the mega-building that he works at) from some evil interlopers. Will hit cinemas July 13 – here's the trailer to get you in the mood.  
[youtu.be/t9QePUT-Yt8](https://youtu.be/t9QePUT-Yt8)



## Early ideas on Early Man

Animation maestro Nick Park is on amiable form for this 30-minute 'in conversation with...' filmed at BFI Southbank, which serves as an introduction to new movie *Early Man* – the writer/director's first feature-length outing since 2005's *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*.  
[youtu.be/myuSqLbiGJk](https://youtu.be/myuSqLbiGJk)



## Marvel builds a buzz

*Avengers: Infinity War* hasn't hit cinemas yet, but that didn't stop Marvel Studios from teasing us with a look at *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, which arrives later this Summer. The sequel to 2015's *Ant-Man*, it brings the gang back together for more size-changing fun – only now he has a super-powered partner.  
[youtu.be/6OntVY2igLw](https://youtu.be/6OntVY2igLw)



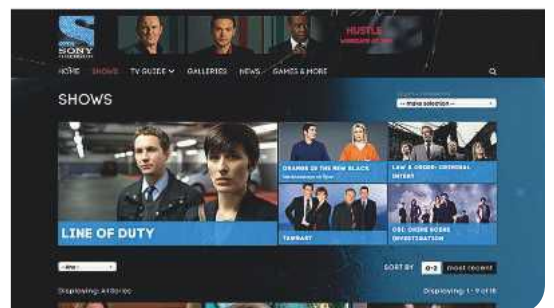
## Living in a box

Poptheatr is the kind of weird and wonderful idea that Kickstarter was made for. Or perhaps it's just weird. Billed as a 'private, portable theatre', it incorporates a twin speaker array into a breathable cloth bag. Connect your 'phone/tablet, stick it on your head, and you have your own personal cinema...  
<http://kck.st/2EMQla2>



## Star Wars goes Solo

The first teaser trailer has landed for Disney's *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (due in cinemas in May), and it's set the franchise fan-base chattering. Too jokey? Too much like *Guardians of the Galaxy*? Our advice is: wait to see the movie before rushing to any judgments...  
[youtu.be/dNWOB0HsvVs](https://youtu.be/dNWOB0HsvVs)



## You're under arrest

A new channel (found across Freeview, Freesat, Sky and YouView) wants to satiate your crime show hunger by filling its schedules with everything from *Line of Duty* and *Person of Interest* to retro showings of *CSI*. Sony Pictures Television Networks says it's targeting a 'predominantly female audience.'  
[www.sonycrimechannel.co.uk](http://www.sonycrimechannel.co.uk)



# Return of the Master

NAD M17 V2 → [www.nadelectronics.com](http://www.nadelectronics.com)

NAD is refreshing its flagship Masters Series hardware with a second-gen iteration of its M17 pre-amp/processor (£5,500), now equipped with Dolby Atmos decoding (DTS:X to follow), and Dirac Live room correction for a premium multichannel performance. Integration with sister company Bluesound's BluOS opens up hi-res streaming and multiroom capabilities (with MQA support), while the Modular Design Construction, says NAD, offers a level of futureproofing. Balanced and unbalanced outputs cater for different partnering amplification.





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# BLOCKBUSTER OLED TVs MAKE THE GRADE

Panasonic's latest OLED heroes have the Hollywood seal of approval. A home cinema fan can't ask for much more, argues **Steve May**







Panasonic officially launched its new OLED range at CES

**THE LONG-STANDING GOAL** of any home cinema enthusiast is to rival (if not exceed) the cinema-going experience in their own home. It was true at the height of Super 8mm film fandom and the videotape revolution, and it's no different now. But in an age of 4K HDR, this simple aspiration has become a lot more complicated.

Panasonic sympathises, and has enlisted the help of Hollywood A-List creatives to fine-tune, even authenticate, its OLED TV image quality.

The Japanese major's romance with Hollywood isn't new. It can be traced back to Panasonic's short-lived ownership of Universal in the 1990s, which in turn led to the development of Panasonic Hollywood Labs (PHL), an innovation and technology centre heavily associated with the development of Blu-ray.

Now with OLED, the corporation has cemented deep working relationships with Technicolor and Deluxe, the biggest post-production and colour grading companies in the world. The aim of this alliance is to ensure its premium screens are as faithful as they can be when it comes to conveying the creative intent of filmmakers.

To drive home the point, Panasonic previewed its 2018 OLED screens at Deluxe-owned Company 3, just a short drive from Hollywood's titular hillside, and LA's star-studded sidewalk.

Both the TX-FZ952 and TX-FZ802 have been tuned with the help of these image wizards. To discover what that actually means, and learn more about the creative grading process which ultimately decides what you see in your home cinema, *HCC* travelled to Tinsel Town.

## Upgrading HDR

Soon to be available in 55in and 65in screen sizes, Panasonic's new OLED screens sport a number of refinements that engineers maintain give them an edge when it comes to UHD image quality.

I spent a day pouring over the panels, and think they may well be right. For starters, both new sets will be compatible with HDR10+, the dynamic metadata upgrade to vanilla-flavoured HDR. This open-source rival to Dolby Vision recently received a boost from influential Hollywood major Warner Bros, which has joined Fox and Amazon in pledging support for the new standard.

Warner, which was instrumental in turning the tide against HD DVD in its format war with Blu-ray, currently supports Dolby Vision on streaming services and select discs. Would it now bump Dolby Vision in favour of HDR10+ on upcoming Blu-ray releases? No one seems entirely sure.

Yet HDR10+ is definitely coming to a disc near you soon. Fox Innovation Lab chief Danny Kaye tells me at a briefing held later at PHL, that HDR10+ would soon be standard on all Fox 4K HDR disc releases. As an aside, I asked Kaye if Fox's new parent, Disney, would also back HDR10+, but he countered with an evasive, 'You best ask them.'

Unlike last year's Panasonic OLED screens, both new TVs share the same base panel,

## Dolby Vision incoming...

.... but not on Panny's TVs



Panasonic may be all about HDR10+ these days, but it has offered a supportive hand to Dolby Vision – although not on its flatscreen range. Instead, the company is adding Dolby Vision to the flagship model in its upcoming 4K Blu-ray player lineup, the DP-UB820.

European Marketing manager Craig Cunningham told *HCC* that Panasonic's dominant position in the UHD player market behooved them to offer Dolby Vision. 'It's only right that we offer support for those users who have Dolby Vision TVs,' he reasoned. 'Not every 4K Blu-ray player buyer has a Panasonic TV, much as we would like that to be the case.' The player is expected to sell for £400 in the Spring.

But Panasonic may yet be saving its biggest UHD player news for later this year. Blu-ray player guru Kazuhiko Kouno confided to *HCC* that there is a fifth new player, a mysterious high-end flagship, in development...



Absolute Black Filter and image processing technology. This is a good thing. The only differences relate to cosmetics and audio implementation; the top-end FZ952 will ship with a new version of the Dynamic Blade speaker, produced in association with Technics. This revised soundbar docks directly into the TV pedestal, and boasts four woofers, a quartet of mid-range drivers, two tweeters, and a quad passive radiator to boost bass. It sounds good for an integrated solution.

Perhaps the most exciting new development on these screens is the introduction of Dynamic LUT (Look Up Table) technology, designed to improve the accuracy of bright colours.

Comparisons with a 2017 TX-EZ1002 model reveal greater visual pop and colour detail, and Panasonic TV guru Paul Williams tells me that image quality will improve further before launch. 'We're still tuning,' he says apologetically. Interestingly, Panasonic is not restricting Dynamic LUT to OLED models, but will introduce it on lower-priced 4K LED LCD TVs, too.

So far so good. But what of that creative alliance? And just what can the work of the industry's top colourists tell us about recreating the movie experience at home?

### Pros back OLED over LED LCD

Christian Zak heads up Technicolor's imaging and colour science department, and describes his team as 'custodians' of the moving image. From first image capture or visual effect render, to distribution in a theatre and eventual home display, his job is to act as a caretaker of picture quality.

OLED, he says, is the closest they've ever got to ensuring the home viewing experience matches



In the Deluxe grading suite, with *Alien: Covenant* (above)

what his team see in the colour grading suite. 'LED LCD doesn't even come close,' he insists. 'OLED is far superior.'

Achieving parity (such as it is) between mastering display and consumer TV has never been easy. 'In the theatre we've always had image quality under control, but the home market has changed greatly over the past ten years,' he says. 'Ten years ago, you would have seen old Sony BVM broadcast CRT video monitors in our grading rooms; everybody used the same technology. Then CRT got phased out and plasma became more prevalent, but it was never an exact match.' OLED, he says, is different.

Panasonic has a particularly close relationship with Hollywood giant Deluxe. Over the past year, Deluxe has purchased 65 of Panasonic's TX-EZ1000 screens for use in post-production facilities.

Stephen Nakamura, a senior colourist at Deluxe, has one of them in his production bay. He's worked with some of the biggest names in Hollywood, including directors David Fincher, Ridley Scott and Steven Spielberg, and cinematographers Dariusz Wolski, Claudio Miranda and Janusz Kaminski. Recent feature film credits include *It*, *Detroit*, *The Martian* and *Alien: Covenant*, and it's the latter he has onscreen when I visit.



His 65in EZ1000 has been colour-matched to a smaller Sony OLED reference monitor that sits in the centre of his console. He describes the Panasonic as 'an amazingly close' match to his studio reference (to my eyes it looks nigh-on identical), and says invariably it's what his (aforementioned) clients watch during the grading process. 'It's also much easier to see minor artefacts on when working,' he confides. Buyers of Panasonic 2018 OLEDs can see exactly the same thing, I'm told, using the True Cinema image preset.

'I was in shock when I saw the many different pieces of footage from TV and movies side-by-side with professional monitors. It's so close. We were maybe 75-80 per cent close with old monitors, but with this Panasonic you're 95 per cent close.'

Nakamura says having a consistently accurate consumer panel on hand is a boon when working on HDR. 'We know that a consumer will be looking at images the way the director and cinematographer wanted them to look.'

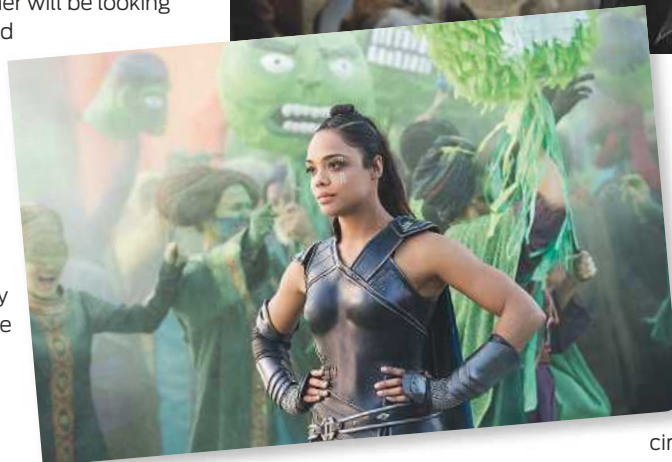
And he has no shortage of tools at his disposal to alter an image. He deftly illustrates how Ridley Scott wanted to denude the tone of *Alien: Covenant* to create the alien landscape. He equates his artistry to painting, and it's easy to admire his brush strokes.

For further insights into the theatrical influence of Hollywood colourists, I meet with Charles Bunnag, Digital Intermediate Colourist at Technicolor. A veteran of Marvel's Cinematic Universe, as well as image quality classics *The Revenant*, *Gravity* and *Godzilla*, Bunnag was hard at work on *Avengers: Infinity War* when HCC dropped by. He stepped us through the grading process for the *Infinity War* trailer, showing us before and after examples. I tried hard to contain my excitement at seeing ungraded Raw files from the *Avengers* set.

'In most movies you have maybe one or two leads. Because *Infinity War* is the culmination of everything that Marvel has been doing for the past ten years, almost every shot has four or five actors in it. So how do you light for that? In the grading environment, we were able to keep the background dark and moody, yet light all the individual actors so that they stand out. That's something very difficult to do on set.'

One sequence has Captain America stepping out of the shadows. 'They [Marvel] wanted this character to be a reveal, but if he comes out of total shadow, that could look really bad on home video. We have to keep that in mind.'

A key takeaway of our chat is that many different versions of a film need to be created to accommodate all the various cinema projection requirements – and all look slightly different. 'For the theatrical trailer, we had to create SDR and HDR grades, then the same again in 3D, as well as an IMAX pass,' reveals Bunnag. 'On a feature film we would do about 18 different grades/variations, before we even get to home video deliverables.'



**Thor: Ragnarok (above) enjoys a more luminous colour palette than earlier outing *Dark World* (top)**

Sherri Potter, president of worldwide post-production for Technicolor, quips that Technicolor and Marvel are a well-oiled creative machine. 'We have five different colourists working on these titles; a prime colourist and subsequent colourists, working on multiple deliveries,' she reveals.

I ask if there's now a uniform look to Marvel movies, but I'm told that's not the case. 'If you compare *Avengers 1* and *2* you would notice a definite difference,' says Potter. 'A different director and cinematographer mean a different aesthetic. Marvel will keep to certain colours (such as the Spider-Man suit), but for the most part we still get to be creative.'

Adds Bunnag: 'If you compare *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Thor: The Dark World*, those are completely opposite in terms of colour palette. *Ragnarok* was basically a comedy, the one before was incredibly serious. It was very different.'

So given that a film fan could watch the same movie at different theatres, and see something different in each one, who's to say what's right when it comes to watching the same movie at home?

'Imagery is subjective,' agrees Potter. At least on big blockbuster releases, when it comes to the home video version, it's the same colourist carrying the aesthetic through, she adds.

'The biggest difference between theatrical and home viewing is the contrast range you have,' comments Bunnag. By way of reference, our *Avengers* trailer dissection was carried out using a Dolby Vision projection system for HDR, which typically achieves 108 nits (between 28-31 foot-lamberts). Had the material been in HDR 3D, this would have dropped to 48 nits.

Which brings us back to Panasonic's Hollywood-tuned presets. 'Home video deliverables are derived from the theatrical, which was signed off by the creatives – director, cinematographer, visual FX supervisor,' says Potter. 'You want to experience grading-room picture quality? Image presets are provided for a reason,' she says ■

**A change of cinematographer resulted in different looks for *Avengers Assemble* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (below)**



# Hygge.

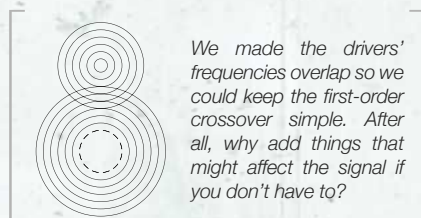
Who says it needs to be all about lamps and couches?

**“What are you doing for your 40th birthday?”**, everyone asked. We thought about it and decided that since we aren't wild about lavish cakes (although we do love a tasty fastelavnsbolle), we'd celebrate a little differently. Even the *thought* of making new speakers makes us warm and fuzzy, so that's what we chose to do.

## Meet the Special Forty: hygge for your ears.

Laurels aren't for resting on, which is why we gave Dynaudio Labs free rein to play. (It gave our accountants a heart attack.) Our only instruction: take our classic tech and see what you'd do differently this time. Their design was nothing short of genius.

They took our classic Esotar 28mm soft-dome tweeter design, put our DSR\* precision coating on it, and then **machined an aerodynamic vent** directly into the powerful neodymium magnet. Then they added more damping material and another pressure-release conduit. Take it apart and look behind it: it's a work of art (except please don't; we spent ages putting it together).

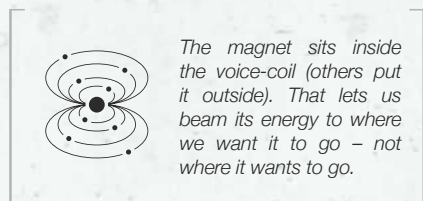


**We called the new tweeter the Esotar Forty**, and it's exclusive to this speaker.

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The woofer also has a **custom magnetic field** – one we created in the lab – thanks to a unique hybrid magnet system. It's part ferrite, part neodymium, and it physically manipulates flux to bend it around the voice-coil for greater power and efficiency.



Those innovations mean the tweeter can reach down to 1000Hz, and the woofer up to 4000Hz. That overlap means smoother integration between treble and bass, and **performance that borders on mesmerising**.

We don't want to bore you with the maths, so here's the English: the extra air movement and flux containment means we have more control over how the tweeter and woofer move. And that means **a more detailed, precise and honest performance**. Just what we (and you) want.

This is a simple-looking speaker. Sure. But wait until you see its Grey Birch High Gloss and Red Birch High Gloss finishes. We painstakingly laminate Finnish Birch veneers many, many, *many* times and cross-cut

them to achieve this striking pattern. Then we use special stains to bring it out even further. Nice, isn't it.



## We want to know what you think.

Join our Special Forty group and together we'll take our technology to the next level. That's right: you can be actively involved in shaping the future of our R&D. And you might even find your idea making it into our next-generation speakers. There's a fastelavnsbolle – and warm feelings of hygge – in it for you if you do.

[www.dynaud.io/SpecialFortyForum](http://www.dynaud.io/SpecialFortyForum)

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# DEMO DELIGHTS

Members of **Team HCC** pick the HDR torture tests, surround sound champions, subwoofer slammers and 3D showcases that get permanent residence on the disc shelf

KONG,  
ALIENS,  
HEAVY  
METAL!





## KONG: SKULL ISLAND

### 'Is that a monkey?'

Sometimes, you want a demo to be fun and in-er-face. An all-out assault on the senses that you can use to showcase everything that's so great about your AV setup. For a sure-fire hit that'll wow visitors to your media room, I can't think of anything better than this sequence from *Kong: Skull Island* – the BD offers Atmos/TrueHD 7.1 or DTS-HD 5.1 mixes.

Chapter 3 is where the magic starts, beginning at 0:27:11 – this sequence runs into the following Chapter, so you could use that as a starting point (but you will miss out on some monkey action...).

The scene is set through the strains of Black Sabbath's *Paranoid* (one of many classic '70s tunes layered through the *KSI* soundtrack), as the expedition starts its bomb-dropping experiments. A barrage of explosions around 0:28:43 ripple through the soundfield, some around your seating position, Tommy Iommi's guitar solo comes to a climax and then... a flying palm tree takes out the chopper. It's a surprise for the characters and the viewer, and the jolt is helped by the Sabbath track coming to a halt and a dramatic silence briefly filling your room, before the downed 'copter heads across the screen in slow-mo, backed up a delightful bass throb and the return of Ozzy and co.

What next? Carnage. Kong's mighty paw heaves into view, swatting the chopper and instigating an aural storm of screeching metal, whirring blades, alarm beeps and yelping airmen, the soundfield pivoting around you as the craft spins. This scene builds to an LFE climax as Kong roars.

Now we segue into Chapter 4, and you can see why there's a Chapter break here as it begins one of 2017's greatest movie moments. Kong stands silhouetted in front of the sun, helicopters heading towards him. The low-register thwump of their blades starts surround left, moves to the LCR and then continues to roam; piercing strings in the score ramp up the tension. We head slowly toward the ape. At around 0:30:38 you get a perfect shot – Kong awaiting the arrival of his foes, bathed in rich orange tones. He calmly curls his massive palm into a fist, and you're about to get the AV ride of your life... **MC**



*Kong Skull Island: like Apocalypse Now, but with a giant ape*

*The Valerian... Blu-ray takes its audience on a 3D thrill ride*



## VALERIAN AND THE CITY OF A THOUSAND PLANETS

### A runaway success in 3D

The advent of 4K HDR panels has meant that 3D has fallen off the list of must-have features for most television manufacturers these days. However, the good news is that nobody seems to have told the film distributors about this – ensuring there are still plenty of new 3D Blu-rays making it to market.

Released to baffling audience indifference last year, Luc Besson's quintessentially European space opera *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* is one such recent release that I've returned to again and again in the few months since it made its debut on 3D Blu-ray.

Shot in 2D, but conceived from the ground-up as a 3D experience, it is quite possibly the best showcase for the format since James Cameron's *Avatar*. It also boasts one of the most exacting tests of the capabilities (and limitations) of your 3D setup money can buy.

Skip to 0:54:19 and strap yourself in as Valerian pursues a group of unknown aliens through the varied environments that make up Alpha Station, crashing through walls as he goes, the camera mainly remaining locked behind him.

This all adds up to a dazzling display of three-dimensional depth and volume for your flatscreen or PJ; of perfectly rendered stereoscopic spaces for the camera to race through. Or, maybe, it's welcome to the nightmare world of crosstalk.

The sequence only gets more taxing when the chase moves outside the station, with spaceships ducking between towers and down tight, twisting tunnels. If your 3D display is incapable of producing good black levels, all you'll experience here is an incoherent mess. But if it can, then the results are simply breathtaking. **AvB**





IT

## The darkness! The horror!

*It* is not a reference-grade 4K disc, mostly because it wasn't created from true 4K source material. It does, however, feature an aggressive HDR upgrade, and both HDR10 and Dolby Vision HDR masters.

Two scenes are particularly good for both testing televisions and exploring the differences between HDR10 and DV. The first occurs in Chapter 4 (0:34.02-0:35.50), where bully-boy Patrick Hockstetter foolishly explores sewers looking for 'the fat kid.'

This sequence is tough for TVs because it features an unusually dynamic set of shifting contrast combinations. One minute a shot will be almost completely dark, the next it will be brightly illuminated by, say, an ignited flame. Even less extreme shots still exhibit pronounced light and dark juxtapositions.

These varying average light levels against dark backdrops cruelly expose any weaknesses in an LCD TV's backlight system, revealing either light banding or haloing around bright objects, or general backlight fluctuations and clouding inconsistencies. And this sequence also proves challenging for OLED TVs, causing either sudden and startling shifts to grey or subtle vertical banding in dark areas.

Another testing scene occurs between 0:42.24 and 0:46.22, and features the kids meeting up in a water-filled quarry. It's a bright, colour-rich HDR sequence with lots of tricky skin tones, natural colours and direct and reflected sunlight, making it a real test of a display's brightness and colour gamut

Warner's 4K *It* release offers both HDR10 and Dolby Vision encodes

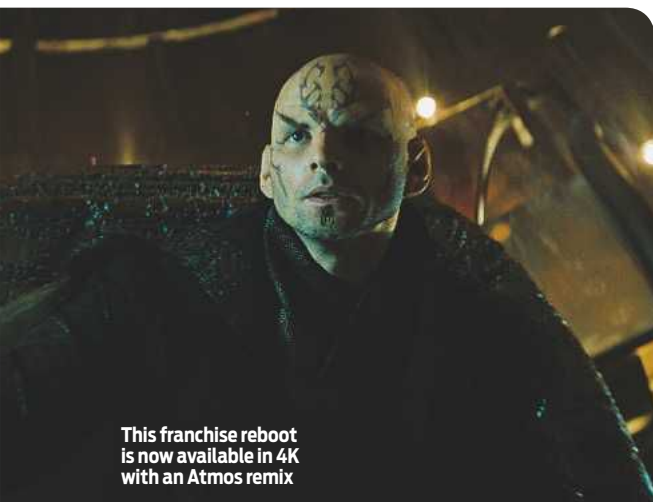


You don't also have to strip to your underwear to sample *It*'s HDR delights...



capabilities. Those that struggle with brightness 'clip' detail in the skies and skin highlights. Or if their colour handling is limited/off, skin tones will look orangey or plasticky, while the green of the trees will look either muted or 'radioactive'.

This sequence provides a fine example of DV's advantages over HDR10 too, with the DV encode offering noticeably more detail and colour precision – provided your TV is up to it. **JA**



This franchise reboot is now available in 4K with an Atmos remix

## STAR TREK [2009]

### Where it all began

Regular readers will know I use this movie a lot in hardware reviews. And for very good reason – it's director J.J. Abrams' finest hour, and has the best opening sequence of any movie, ever. Add in the recent Atmos remastered sound on Paramount's UHD Blu-ray release and it's better still.

From the opening Paramount/Spyglass/Bad Robot intro (0:00:10) you get full overhead sonic action thanks to the swelling *Star Trek* score. The music subsides and at 0:01:05 the beeps

and whistles of the USS Kelvin's communications run across the overheads and through the rear channels, creating spacious and involving ambience from the outset.

By 0:02:28 the Kelvin is under fire, and the Narada's angular cluster-torpedoes have an equally spiky and metallic sound that transitions across every speaker in the room. This soundmix has a rare clarity that allows you to pinpoint each effect within the maelstrom.

Crew members spin into the silence of space and the entire soundstage shuts dramatically down to almost silence. Only the Atmos speakers have any work here, producing the faintest of echoes to deliver the illusion of vastness and emptiness at 0:03:10.

The opening sequence's audio direction is truly masterful. As Captain Robau descends in Turbo Lift C 17, the camera is low, looking upwards to the huge, heavily damaged engineering hall (0:04:11). The sound maps the camera position and visual effects with precision, the height channels recreating huge electrical sparks in the roof high above.

From roughly 0:10:00 onwards, Kirk Snr's fate is sealed as he sets a collision course. The orchestral score brings in a swathe of strings, underpinning the deep emotion of Kirk Jnr being born as his father dies.

It's action, peril, heart-rending emotion, mass destruction and hope wrapped up in 11 minutes and 30 seconds of stunning cinematography and absolutely sublime audio. This is what home cinema is all about. **RS**



Action, peril and heart-rending emotion – all in less than 15 minutes



## LA LA LAND

### Putting a spotlight on image quality

*La La Land* on 4K BD is a little soft and noisy at times, but it has attributes that make it a useful test disc. Writer/director Damian Chazelle uses a bold palette of unusually bright colours throughout, which the disc's HDR and wide colour gamut really push.

The one sequence that I often use runs from 1:13.03 to 1:16.10, where Sebastian performs in a band while watched by an increasingly dismayed Mia.

The opening shot is pretty much the ultimate test of a TV's contrast performance. Sebastian and, shortly after, another band member are illuminated by a bright bluish spotlight against a near completely black backdrop. Given the enormous luminance range between the spotlight and blackness around it, this is almost always joined by stripes of unwanted light around the spotlights on edge-lit LCD TVs, or blooming light around the spotlights on direct-lit sets. It's also a good sequence to demonstrate the black level/local contrast advantages of OLED over LCD.

We're then treated to a dizzying variety of vibrant, harshly lit colours, also against a very dark backdrop. This will reveal lots about the range and brightness of hues your display can render, as well as its ability to preserve bright and dark elements simultaneously without compromising the intensity of either.

And it's one of the sharpest, cleanest moments in *La La Land*, bursting with detail – can your TV/PJ render 4K levels of clarity without producing stressful object edges or exaggerated grain? **JA**



*La La Land* (4K BD) is a medley of bright colours and precision lighting

## LUCA TURILLI'S RHAPSODY: PROMETHEUS

### Orc-hestral manoeuvres



Accompanied by two CDs, this well-priced (£17) BD serves up symphonic metal – imagine medieval choirs, riffing guitars and Tolkien themes – in an extraordinary Dolby Atmos listening experience.

Opener *Nova Genesis* lulls you with monastery chants

and guitar tune-ups, before an electronic surge sweeps up from the rear and collides with guitars chugging left and right. There's nothing subtle about third track *Rosenkreuz* either, which feels one small mosh pit away from a Eurovision entry. But as guitars and organs rain down from above, you'll have to concede it's a hugely entertaining concoction.

Next up is *Anahata*, which is predictably pompous, but the resolution in the Atmos mix leaves the accompanying CDs sounding positively gritty. There's all sorts of odd instrumental intrusions here, including some Spanish flamenco, which become a lot more interesting in the wider Atmos soundstage.

Musically not everyone's cup of tea, but *Prometheus* dramatically demonstrates just how immersive Dolby Atmos music can sound. It'll leave you stomping your feet and calling for an encore. **SM**



*Whiplash* (Blu-ray) closes with a thrilling demonstration of musical fidelity

## WHIPLASH

### Banging the drum

*Whiplash* is mainly about acting chops rather than spellbinding sound, but at the end of the film it gives you a genuine treat. The sequence begins at 1:32.25, as Miles Teller begins his drum routine for the song *Caravan*. It isn't about gut-wrenching bass or pin-you-to-the-seat dynamics. There's not even that much going on in the surround channels. Instead, this is a demonstration of timing, tonality and realism.

As the rest of the band joins in, you should be able to follow every instrument – that scorching brass section, slick double bass and groovy piano – and they should all sound absolutely convincing because they've been lovingly recorded on the mix itself.

And as a test for your sub this is in a different league. At 1:36.34, Teller delivers a thrilling sequence of kick drum strikes – around two dozen in the space of a few seconds. These are in the LFE channel and the very best subwoofers will record every strike as a distinct impact rather than a sort of dull buzz.

At 1:36.50, J.K. Simmons tries to end proceedings but instead we launch into a truly insane drum solo which dies to crisp, clean cymbal strikes. The surround channels then come into play as Teller pushes himself to the limit, and by 1:39.00 you should be in a blizzard of distinct drum hits that peel away to a single snare. It builds again to the final blare of brass at 1:41.47 where the film ends. Sonic perfection right there. **ES**





The Dark Knight's IMAX sequences are no joke...



Edge of Tomorrow (right) opens with an LFE surprise



## THE DARK KNIGHT

### It'd be a crime to miss this

My go-to disc to assess picture quality after SDR calibration is the 2008 two-disc BD of *The Dark Knight*. While 'Scope ratio scenes are marred by edge enhancement, the full-field IMAX sequences are pristinely captured and mastered, none more so than the bank robbery play-out.

At 0:00:53, we get an aerial swoop over Gotham skyscrapers that should look smooth without significant telecinic judder. As the camera zooms in on the central building, you can determine crushed or overexposed shadow detail by looking at how easy it is to differentiate one dark window pane from another. And if overscan is disabled on your display, at 0:01:09 you'll notice reflections of the filming helicopter at the top left of the screen.

Up next, the Joker waits on a street corner, mask in hand. This frame should convey depth without looking flat: the lamp post to his left positioned clearly behind him, and the bag hanging by his right side jutting out in a three-dimensional manner. Properly calibrated, your display should present the

correct hue of sunlit warmth on the building, a neutral grey on the road, and a very pale shade of blue in the sky. His silhouette against the brightness

will quickly tell you whether you've set your sharpness too high (it should look natural, not etchy).

Lastly, as the robbers' glide down a zip-line to the bank's roof (0:01:40) it should appear smooth without shimmering or tearing, which would indicate switched-on motion interpolation. **VT**



## Over to you...

HCC readers reveal their demo disc picks



### Robert Corrigan:

'For sound it's got to be the shoot-out in Michael Mann's *Heat*! And visually, the shot of the ship passing Saturn in *Interstellar* is very impressive.'

### Mark Hevingham:

'The 4K image of *Blade Runner 2049* is STUNNING.'

### Stewart Heed:

'*Pacific Rim* – the city fight! The combination of the bold colours, incredible VFX and big booming sound.'

### Brett Gidlow

'The opening sequence of *Valerian...* with David Bowie's *Space Oddity*.'

### Dirk de Sagher

'*Dunkirk* in 4K is a stunning demo disc!'

## EDGE OF TOMORROW

### Feel the bass, feel the fear

A second appearance for Doug Liman's superb (and blackly comic) sci-fi in an HCC demo disc roundup, yet this time around our focus is on the movie's very opening moments. There's no onscreen action here to excite – instead, it's all about bass.

Press play from the Blu-ray menu and you're right into it – as the Village Roadshow logo flickers, a news show snippet gives us some background info, and the soundtrack (DTS-HD MA) disgorges some unexpectedly low LFE notes that prep you for the incoming drama.

At least, it does if you're listening through a suitably potent speaker system. Run *Edge of Tomorrow* through the speakers in your flatscreen TV and you'll likely think there's little going on beyond some wobbly visuals.

With a dedicated sub in play, this sequence can help you get a grip on your bass-maker's potency. Tones here comfortably drop below 20Hz. Lesser subwoofers will begin to roll-off considerably; serious setups will bravely soldier on. This may annoy your neighbours, but will help you locate anything in your room that isn't suitably secure... **MC** ■



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 Dealer of the Year **Winner** 2014  
 Best Lighting Project **Winner** 2015



Best Home Cinema **Winner** 2015  
 Most Outstanding Entry Winner's **Winner** 2015



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# Bigscreen playroom

One half of this entertainment space offers cinematic AV, the other lets its owners relax in style. Time to pick up a cue...

## KIT CHECKLIST

**ARTCOUSTIC:** 3 x Spitfire 16-8s (L/C/R); 2 x Multi SL1039s (rear L/R); 2 x Spitfire 6-3s (surround L/R); 4 x Architect 4-2s (Atmos height); 3 x Control 2 subwoofers; 1 x Control 1 subwoofer; 3 x PA-750 subwoofer power amplifiers

**DENON:** AVR-X6200 receiver

**CONTROL4:** SR260 remote; processor; C4-AMP108 power amplifier

**JVC:** DLA-X9000 projector

**PROJECTA:** 2.40:1 ratio Homescreen Deluxe projector screen

**KALEIDESCAPE:** Premiere system

**STARSCAPE:** Star ceiling (19 x Infinity panels)

**FORTRESS:** 10 x custom cinema chairs, three with D-Box integration

**ARTNOVION:** Acoustic treatments





### WILD WETS

Does *Blue Planet II* cause jaws to drop on 4K Blu-ray? p99

**THIS PROFESSIONAL PROJECT**, designed and fitted by Kent-based outfit New Wave AV, meets its owners' demands for a multi-purpose space where home cinema thrills are joined by an entertainment area with bar, pool table and wall-mounted TV.

The 'business end' of the room couples a 3m fixed-frame screen with a discreetly situated JVC DLA-X9000 projector and 7.2.4 audio, using Artcoustic speakers and Denon power/processing. Two rows of Fortress seating provide space for up to 10 film fans. Three of the chairs have a surprise: 'It's great to hear family and friends laugh and gasp when the D-Box seats kick in for the first time!' say the owners.

Above the seating area, framed by a ceiling soffit that houses height-layer speakers and an RGBW light run, is an eye-catching star ceiling, using Starscape Infinity panels.

### Where's the wall?

One question arose during the planning stage: where to fit rear speakers in a room that has no rear wall? The answer was to use slim Artcoustic Multi Soundbar enclosures, arranged vertically into twin supporting pillars purposely designed to be wide enough for the task. These, and the surround speakers, are hidden by an acoustic cloth; the room walls feature acoustic wadding dressed in a faux suede fabric.

As this is a space used by an entire family, simplified control was vital. A Crestron processor handles integration of AV and lighting; programmed tricks include the JVC PJ automatically switching to its correct lens memory preset, depending on the aspect ratio of content from the Kaleidescape player. Different lighting scenes are just a button press away ■

### A. Above and beyond

Four in-ceiling speakers top off the cinema's seven-channel base layer for a premium Atmos/DTS:X experience. A nine-channel Denon receiver and Crestron rack amp provide power

### B. Ready to rumble

The central three Fortress seats on the room's rear row incorporate three-axis ('pitch', 'roll' and 'heave') D-Box actuators, for an added dimension to movie watching ➤



The room was sonically treated with absorption panels from specialist Artnovion, which were then wrapped in an acoustic cloth



Behind the screen lurks this battalion of speakers – three Artcoustic Spitfire 16-8s and a pair of dual-driver Control 2 subwoofers

## **C. Make mine a double**

To the rear of the cinema is this bar/breakout area. It retains a view of the main display, plus an additional second screen

## **D. Starry, starry night**

The cinema's star ceiling (from UK company Starscape) features 2,100 fibres in varying diameters, illuminated by a pair of RGBW projectors

## **E. Standing proud**

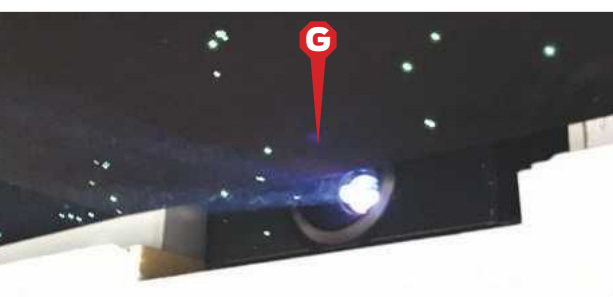
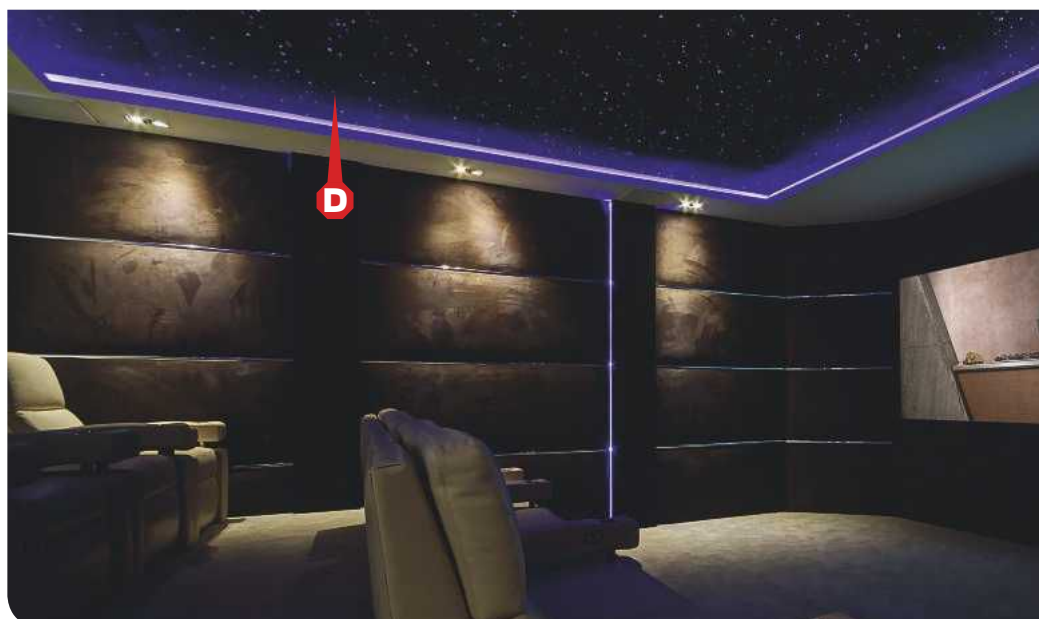
This dividing column houses one of the system's rear back speakers

## **F. At your service**

Providing entertainment is a Kaleidescape Premiere system, combining a 24TB K-Server and M700 vault/player, delivering movies on demand

## **G. Precision picture**

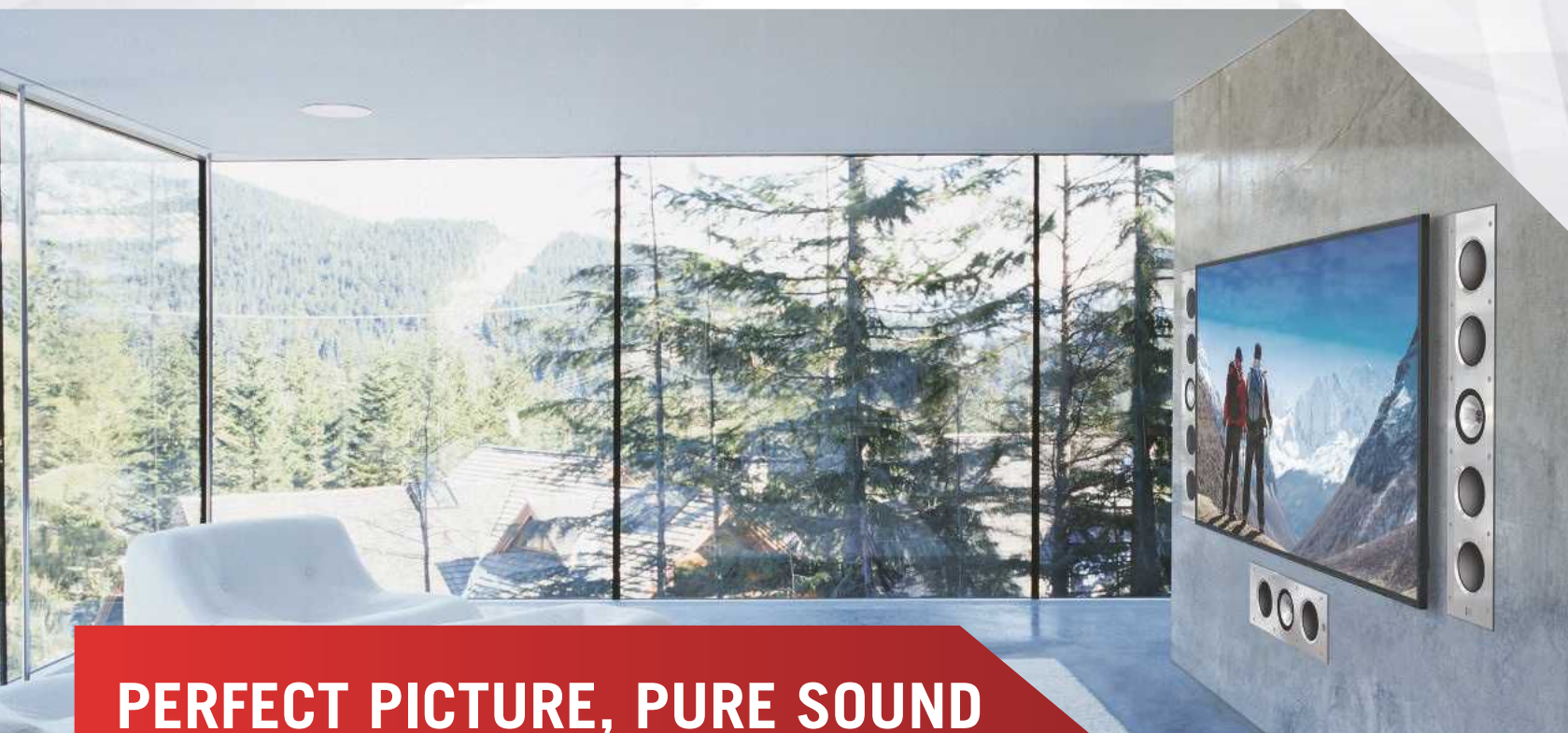
The lens shift and throw ratio flexibility of the JVC DLA-X9000 were key to allowing it to be cunningly installed in this rear-wall cubby hole







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# REVIEWS

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## Kings of compact

Wharfedale targets budget buyers with its £450 DX-2 sub/sat speaker package. Can this smallscale system make a big impression? Turn to p52 to find out...

### HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed

## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
4K HDR projector  
illuminated by  
a laser diode system

**POSITION:**  
Towards the top  
of Sony's home  
projection range

**PEERS:**  
SIM2 Nero 4 UHD;  
JVC DLA-Z1

Sony's laser PJ takes  
**John Archer** for a spin.  
And leaves him in one, too

# Leading the way

I wouldn't normally describe a £15,000 home entertainment product as a bargain. But in the case of the Sony VPL-VW760ES projector, I'm more than happy to make an exception.

This is a true, native 4K projector. There's no 'e-Shifting', pixel manipulation, or fancy multiple-mirror flashing going on here. The SXRD chips inside the VW760ES carry the full 4K worth of pixels. In fact, since they've come down from Sony's professional projectors, they utilise a cinematic 4K resolution of 4,096 x 2,160 rather than the 3,840 x 2,160 used by UHD TVs.

And this beast of a beamer joins a fast-growing list of projectors that support high dynamic range – specifically HDR10 and the broadcast-friendly HLG format.

Given the difficulties projectors often have with HDR's extreme brightness range, it's really the VW760ES's laser diode illumination system that is its star attraction. Lasers can typically run brighter and offer more light control than normal projection lamps, making them potentially much better at coping with the image demands of HDR sources.

The VW760ES still only claims a maximum brightness of 2,000 Lumens. JVC's also laser-based DLA-Z1 [HCC #273], by comparison, claims 3,000 Lumens, while SIM2's Nero 4 UHD [HCC #279] claims a mighty 5,000 Lumens. Those two models, though, cost £35,000 and £30,000 respectively, making this new Sony unit look positively bargain-priced.

Sony also claims that the enhanced light control made possible by its laser diode arrangement is capable of delivering an essentially 'infinite' contrast range, making that 2,000 Lumens spec go further than it normally would.

As with other laser-lit models, life expectancy here rockets to around 20,000 hours of use compared with the 2,000-5,000 hours associated with standard lamps.

Aiding the VW760ES's picture performance is the latest version of Sony's Reality Creation processing, with its uncanny knack of both improving the quality of HD upscaling and somehow sharpening up native 4K content. Sony's Triluminos processing is also present, working with >

1. You can control zoom, focus and lens shift from here

2. The VW760ES lights its lens via a laser diode, not a traditional lamp



1



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the colour-enhancing laser lighting to deliver an increase in available colour tones.

Finally on the processing front, you get a strong medley of motion processing options, many of which deliver results superior (in the way they reduce judder without causing irksome side effects) to those of really any rival PJ.

### Stylish Sony

All the VW760ES's cutting-edge tech has been fitted into a surprisingly compact (relatively speaking) and attractive body. It's certainly much smaller than its high-end Sony VW5000ES 'big brother' – although presumably that

£65,000 model needs the extra space to handle the heat generated by its much higher 5,000 Lumens of light output.

Once you've got this projector in place

in your theatre, setup is quite slick. There are dedicated focus, zoom and shift buttons on the remote, all of which control the motorised lens with exemplary precision. You can also set different lens 'memories' for different aspect ratios, so that you always get the maximum benefit from your screen.

Connections are slightly hard to access under a ledge down the projector's left side, but cover the key bases with two HDMI inputs, two 12V trigger jacks, an RS-232 control port, an IR input, and Ethernet and USB service ports.

Those HDMI's can't quite pass full-bandwidth 4K HDR images at 50 or 60fps. With such content – such as *Billy Lynn's Long Half-Time Walk* on 4K Blu-ray, or numerous video games – chroma subsampling is reduced to 4:2:2 from the full-range 4:4:4 possible with 24p sources.

This is an improvement over the more limited (4:2:0) offering of Sony's entry-level VW260ES 4K projector [HCC #280]. And, in my experience, doesn't deliver any really noticeable colour degradation.

If you're still a fan of 3D you'll be pleased to hear that this model supports it. As usual, though, we weren't given any glasses we might have used to put the PJ's 3D performance through its paces.

### Sharp as a blade

That I've mentioned the VW760ES in the same breath as £30,000 (and above) projectors already gives you a hint as to why I think it's great value at £15,000. But it's spending time in the presence of its pictures that's really got me thinking of adding £15,000 to my mortgage.

Perhaps the most immediately obvious aspect of its images is how sensationally sharp and detailed they look. While other 4K projection solutions, especially DLP ones, have their sharpness moments, there really is no replacement for the experience of seeing a native 4K source mapped pixel-for-pixel to a true 4K display device.

The detail reproduced from the recently released and beautifully rich and textured *Blade Runner 2049* 4K platter is consistently jaw-dropping; one of the finest demonstrations of 4K's capabilities I've ever seen, in fact.

'The most immediately obvious aspect of its images is how sensationally sharp and detailed they look'

3





4



Facial pores, individual hairs, the weave in clothing, the textures in sand and concrete, the seemingly endless crags in Harrison Ford's face... all of this image minutiae is immaculately delivered without so much as a hint of blurring or softness.

Such intense clarity makes the *Blade Runner* world feel more direct and 'real', as well as giving the film a commanding sense of space and depth, enhancing its already epic nature.

When there's motion in the frame, the Sony doesn't really bat an eye-lid. Motion handling is outstanding, the True Cinema setting the projector defaults to showcasing a particularly excellent balance of judder reduction and naturalism, ensuring that the image still looks unprocessed and movie-like rather than resembling a cheap TV show.

A more surprising achievement is the VW760ES's black level performance. Sony's laser light management results in some remarkably deep, natural and effective black colours during shadowy *Blade Runner 2049* sequences, such as those during a fight between K (Ryan Gosling) and a replicant [*no more spoilers! - Ed*]. There's only a hint of greyness over black areas, and shadow detail is generally in excellent supply (though there is an exception to this I'll get to later).

Black reproduction doesn't quite hit the levels that JVC's peerless D-ILA projectors muster. However, it's certainly far better than anything I've seen from Sony's standard lamp projectors, any of the recent influx of 4K DLP models, and even SIM2's much more expensive Nero 4 UHD.

And this performance is achieved without the image looking unstable or inconsistent. This is due, presumably, to the speed with which the laser light output can adjust to the needs of content. It sure beats the hell out of a sluggish and imprecise dynamic iris system.

## Finding Neverland

Next to impress is the projector's colour performance. That laser lighting in conjunction with Sony's Triluminos technology delivers rich colours for all the neon and holographic advertising in *Blade Runner 2049*'s street scenes. Yet it also copes beautifully with more subtle sequences, such as those in the desert at the film's beginning, and the orange-drenched Las Vegas scenes.

The jungle hide-out sequence in *Pan* also needs a mention here. This ultra colourful sequence on a 4,000-nit

**3. The Sony measures 56cm wide, but its curved chassis lessens the impact**

**4. Source connection is only via HDMI – other hookups cater to service and system integration**

mastered 4K Blu-ray usually proves a painful challenge for HDR displays, yet it looked nothing short of magnificent on the VW760ES. The laser's vibrant intensity and the optical system's exceptional light controls produces a richness, solidity and authority that suddenly makes this the single most spectacularly good-looking HDR sequence I've witnessed on any projector I've tested. If only it could also make the movie better...

Most projectors are ultimately hamstrung as HDR displays by their lack of brightness – and yes, even the VW760ES can't completely solve this problem. It does, however, present HDR sources with considerably higher brightness peaks than you'll find with the same content in standard dynamic range.

Add this to the enriched colours already noted and you've got pictures from 4K Blu-rays that appear more dynamic and watchable than I've seen them on any PJ, outside of showfloor demos of the you-can't-afford-it VPL-VW5000ES. This PJ really is that good. But...

## Not so fast!

I need to introduce a few riders at this point, lest you start thinking I've stumbled across projection perfection and the rest of the industry can just shut up shop.

My main bugbear is that while the VW760ES looks suitably punchy with HDR material, it still doesn't have quite enough luminance power to stop very dark areas – especially those contrasted by bright backdrops – resembling detail-free chasms rather than natural parts of the image. An example comes in *Blade Runner 2049*, as Wallace interviews Deckard in a bizarre orange room. In some shots you can barely see Harrison Ford's face at all, leaving you having to try and guess what he's emoting. It's a challenging scene that the Sony can't quite handle.

There is a way of reducing this issue: increasing the contrast setting. With Sony's 4K HDR models, increasing the contrast has the effect of reducing the full dynamic range of the images you're watching by raising the brightness 'floor'. While you're actually reducing the light range of images with every upwards contrast step, you're also introducing more light into the darkest areas without, crucially, significantly damaging black levels – as you would if you started to push the brightness setting.

I found, though, that I had to push the Contrast setting up to almost its maximum value to substantially reduce >



5

the silhouetting effect – and even then it wasn't entirely gone with extreme sequences such as the *Blade Runner 2049* torture test.

It then turned out that pushing the contrast very high causes another problem with supremely bright HDR content: clipping. In other words, loss of detail and tonal subtlety in the picture's brightest areas.

This wasn't actually a problem for *Blade Runner 2049* thanks to that film's strikingly limited HDR range. With the much higher brightness peaks of *Pan*, however, an elevated

**'Profound blacks combine with subtle colours, excellent detailing and an almost magical level of refinement'**

contrast setting on the VW760ES led to some pretty substantial 'flaring out' of ultra bright areas. The bright sun shining at the side of the planet as Peter first arrives in Neverland lost its definition.

Pause this shot, reduce the contrast and – lo and behold – by the time you get back to around the 65 or 60 setting normal detail levels start to be restored.

In the end I settled on a compromise, setting brightness to 55 and contrast to 75, but I couldn't engineer any perfect combination to completely kill that silhouetting issue – or at least find one which didn't have a knock-on effect to the projector's black level performance. You may find you want to consider tweaking the PJ's settings for different films.

It's worth reflecting from all this that a truly watchable VW760ES HDR picture isn't an especially accurate one, since you've had to reduce the image's dynamic range by raising the contrast floor.

This is a compromise I've long come to not just accept but welcome where projectors are concerned. So much better to appreciate that HDR needs to be manipulated to suit a projector's capabilities than to slavishly try – and fail – to conjure up a 'native' HDR image that was really designed for ultra-bright TVs.

## SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** Yes. Active shutter **4K:** Yes. 4,096 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; HLG  
**CONNECTIONS:** 2 x HDMI inputs; 2 x 12V trigger; RS-232; Ethernet port; USB (service)  
**BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 2,000 Lumens **CONTRAST (CLAIMED):** 'Infinite'  
**ZOOM:** 2.06x **DIMENSIONS:** 560(w) x 223(h) x 496(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 20kg

**FEATURES:** SXRD projector; laser diode lighting; Reality Creation processing; Motionflow processing; 20,000-hour claimed 'lamp' life; 24dB claimed fan noise (in SDR mode); two dark room and one bright room cinema settings; 28ms input lag in Input Lag Reduction mode; vertical lens shift (+85%/-80%); horizontal lens shift (+31%/-31%); 1.38-2.83:1 throw ratio; built-in RF 3D emitter; 4K/60fps playback (with 4:2:2 chroma subsampling)

## PARTNER WITH



### SCREEN EXCELLENCE

**ENLIGHTOR 4K:** Partner the VW760ES with a quality screen. Screen Excellence's Enlightor 4K line is acoustically transparent and black-backed to eliminate rear reflections. Priced around £2,500 for 120in, 2:37:1.

Another issue to consider is that this high-end Sony runs quite noisily in HDR mode, as its cooling fans try to handle all that laser light goodness. It's a smooth, consistent sound, at least, which makes it relatively easy to tune out. Still, if you can't box the VW760ES into a bit of (air-circulating) furniture, at least try and set it as far away from your seating position as you can. The 2.06x zoom and 1.38-2.83:1 throw ratio could be helpful in this regard.

The VW760ES deserves some more positive praise before I wrap up. So let me stress that it's both a brilliant upscaler of high-definition sources and a sumptuous handler of standard dynamic range content. There's none of the sense of a slight contrast compromise, sometimes seen with HDR projectors when they step down to SDR playback. Profound black levels combine with beautifully subtle colours, excellent shadow detailing (there's no silhouetting here), and that almost magical level of refinement that separates the classiest displays from the rest.

## Best in class

In an ideal world the VW760ES might have squeezed out another 500 Lumens of brightness from its laser light engine, and it definitely would have been less expensive. The bottom line, though, is that for the vast majority of the time it crafts gorgeous pictures that look better – comfortably better, actually – than those of some projectors that cost much more.

It's not meant or priced for a casual cinema setup, and warrants an installation that counters its running noise. But at the same time it has the style and usability of a genuine consumer product, and an asking price that ruthlessly undercuts the competition. It therefore finds an entirely new gap in the market, and fills it perfectly ■

**5. Sony's premium PJ sucks in air to keep its laser engine cool**

## HCC VERDICT



### Sony VPL-VW760ES

→ £15,000 → [www.sony.co.uk](http://www.sony.co.uk)

**WE SAY:** Not quite bright enough to be perfect, but this is still the finest HDR projector we've tested – despite being much more affordable than its closest high-end rivals.



"stunningly good"  
-avforums.com



"A superior-sounding, movie mad speaker system  
offering serious value for money"  
-Home Cinema Choice



"AMAZING"  
-Trustedreviews.com



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**David Vivian** wonders if slim, tall, gorgeous (and metal) speakers hit the right home cinema notes

# Piega takes to the catwalk

Most 5.1 systems that pack a decent punch look about as sleek and demure as Stonehenge. Were that not the case, the make-it-all-disappear custom install model would probably never have got off the ground. Even so, we are a stoic lot on the whole, prepared to give up a little floor space and aesthetic harmony in the name of sonic grandeur with curtain-flapping bass.

If you're fortunate enough to have your bigscreen in a big room, perhaps such monolithic intrusion isn't a big deal. But wouldn't it be nice if a willowy, softly gleaming, meticulously built and finished speaker array with advanced drivers and tiny overall footprint – and one that looks so good it actually improves the décor of any room it inhabits – sounded the beefy, bouncy biz as well? Here's a contender from Piega.

Unpacking is the work of moments, the only elements requiring any conspicuous lifting effort at all being the lofty, pencil-like TMicro 60 towers and the chunky but determinedly *bijou* TMicro subwoofer. The remaining members of the team – the TMicro centre and TMicro 40 surrounds – are comparatively small, beautifully formed and light enough to balance on one hand, despite being clothed in the same classy, cool-to-the-touch aluminium.

All the enclosures apart from the sub have one thing in common, though: a close relative of the ribbon tweeter called an Air Motion Transformer (AMT), or AMT-1 in Piega's case. It consists of an extremely light, 1in x 1.4in folded diaphragm and a powerful magnetic drive made of high-purity neodymium. AMTs typically confer many of the benefits of a pure ribbon (speed, crisp transients, detail resolution, low distortion and openness) but with production costs closer to that of a dome tweeter.

## Happy shiny speakers

A quick rewind on the Piega story might be helpful at this point. The Zurich-based speaker manufacturer was founded in 1986 but has only recently come officially to the UK with a couple of model lines.

The company certainly has form when it comes to ribbon tweeter technology. Its Linear Drive Ribbon (LDR) coaxial tweeter was claimed to be the first ribbon unit that could reach low enough to handle some mid-range duties. Piega also produced the first commercially available

aluminium-housed hi-fi loudspeaker back in 1989, and seamless alloy enclosures continue to be used in its expensive designs as well as the more affordable TMicro lineup auditioned here. A stated 'style without compromise' design offensive applies equally to both.

This means almost impossibly slinky proportions for the TMicro 60. It measures just 13.5cm wide, and is barely any deeper. At 1.06m tall it casts a long shadow, but has a single front-firing port which means it can be placed much closer to walls either side of a display without unduly augmenting and bloating the lower frequencies. Nor is the alloy build (available with a black anodized or white lacquer finish, by the way) merely for show. Piega argues that it ensures 'absolute consistency in resisting resonance' and allows for a slim enclosure to still offer copious internal dimensions.

But what about moving some air? To this end, the TMicro 60 has no fewer than three 4.7in MDS-coned midbass drivers to complete the three-way system configuration. For the TMicro centre, the AMT high-frequency driver is flanked by a brace of 3.9in MDS drivers, but it's a return to the marginally larger 4.7in unit for the tiny two-way TMicro 40 rears. The real low-frequency heavy lifting is the responsibility of the active TMicro Sub, of course. Compact it may be, but a combination of a 7.1in MDS woofer, 150W amp and 12-litre bass-reflex aluminium enclosure claims a response down to a respectably rumble 30Hz. The onboard amp can even be configured to have a stereo output of 2 x 50W, facilitating a simple 2.1 setup without the need for additional amplification.

The family Vivian 38ft x 18ft x 12ft cinema room – usually served by wall-mounted B&W speakers and a hulking, two-person-lift Mission sub – could be a challenge too far for the aptly-named TMicros but, boy, they look cool. And teeny. After a good deal of experimentation (resulting in settings that could have been anticipated), >

### AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
5.1-channel  
speaker package

**POSITION:**  
More lifestyle-  
oriented than Piega's  
traditional Classic,  
Premium and Coax

**PEERS:**  
ATC HTS7;  
KEF Q Series

**1. Piega's slim enclosures are also available in (pricier) black and white guises**

the sub ended up being run near flat-out to make its presence felt. But it does so rather heroically considering what it's taken the place of, crucially refusing to sound too compressed or distressed. When playing music later, I eased the level down.

## Don't back Luc in anger

But first up it was the Blu-ray of Luc Besson's sensationally daft, comic-adapted sci-fi fantasy *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets*. This may have slumped at the box office, but it's an enjoyable enough way to gauge any 5.1 speaker system's ability to, by turns, deliver fine detail and vocal intelligibility, cope with a massive dynamic thumping, and embrace those weirdly audible outer-space soundscapes. It's no surprise that the Piega package, with its ribbon-style AMT tweeters, narrow

'The TMicro system is clear, smooth, low in colouration, nimble on its feet and punches above its weight'

baffles and super-stiff metal enclosures, is more at home aching the delicate, intricate and spatial stuff. Actually, it's at its best during the comparatively gentle opening scene scored by David Bowie's *Space Oddity*, which sounds consistently great as it migrates from the front channels to the surrounds.

Impressively, team TMicro doesn't buckle when the action ramps up and becomes subwoofer reliant, as it does soon after. The film's mix isn't shy of keeping the TMicro 40 bookshelf speakers occupied, and the numerous panning effects are seamless and tonally even enough to suggest fine driver integration. The viscera-wobbling violence and excitement my usual setup is capable of generating in this large space never quite happens with the Piega array (fed from a Denon AVR-X4300H), but the shortfall isn't so great as to be a deal-breaker (or, surprisingly, necessitate moving the lot to a smaller room). And some compensation comes by way of remarkable smoothness and refinement, natural tonality, winning bass agility and almost uncannily solid

## SPECIFICATIONS

### Piega TMicro 60

**DRIVE UNITS:** 1 x AMT tweeter; 3 x 4.7in MDS midbass drivers **ENCLOSURE:** Front-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 45Hz-40kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 90dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 20W-150W **DIMENSIONS:** 1,060(h) x 135(w) x 170(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 16kg

### Piega TMicro Centre

**DRIVE UNITS:** 1 x AMT tweeter; 2 x 3.9in MDS midbass drivers **ENCLOSURE:** Front-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 50Hz-40kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 87dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 20W-150W **DIMENSIONS:** 120(h) x 410(w) x 130(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 5.5kg

### Piega TMicro 40

**DRIVE UNITS:** 1 x AMT tweeter; 1 x 4.7in MDS midbass driver **ENCLOSURE:** Front-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 50Hz-40kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 87dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 20W-150W **DIMENSIONS:** 240(h) x 140(w) x 170(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 4kg

### Piega TMicro Sub

**DRIVE UNITS:** 1 x 7.1in MDS woofer **ENCLOSURE:** Down-firing, ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** Down to 30Hz (-3dB) **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 150W **REMOTE CONTROL:** No **DIMENSIONS:** 360(h) x 260(w) x 300(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 14kg **FEATURES:** Speaker-level input/output; stereo phono input; phase switch; crossover control; auto mute

## PARTNER WITH



**VALERIAN AND THE CITY OF A THOUSAND PLANETS:** We've eulogised about the 3D presentation of this Luc Besson sci-fi flick (see p26), and its Atmos/TrueHD soundmix is no slouch either. Definitely one to add to your Blu-ray library.

imaging. These strengths suit the equally barmy *Kingsman: The Golden Circle*, the knowing Bond-bastic bass 'n' brass score delivered with zeal and crisply defined timbral contrasts, and Colin Firth's immaculate enunciation with impressive precision and clarity. And this sonic repertoire works particularly well with music. Play some Randy Newman – *The Great Debate*, from his terrific *Dark Matter* album, say – and there's enough detail, warmth and texture to encourage a break from soundtrack Armageddon.

## Wrapping up in style

In a nutshell, the TMicro system is clear, smooth, low in colouration, nimble on its feet and punches above its weight. What it does it does well, and that includes playing music with a deft touch as elegant and well-crafted as its appearance. Both individually and as a 5.1 system, the Piega TMicros are classy performers without question. Yes, in the final reckoning, this combo is just a tad too relaxed and safe-sounding to make a totally inspiring 5.1 package if you like your action adventure thrills with an afterburner dressing, but that's a compromise you may be willing to make if refinement and an unobtrusive installation are in your sights. A qualified recommendation ■

**2. The TMicro Sub uses a pedestal base to lift its driver off the floor**

2



## HCC VERDICT



### Piega TMicro 5.1

→ £4,000 → [www.piega.co.uk](http://www.piega.co.uk)

**WE SAY:** An expensive but classy package for those seeking high style in their home cinema, with a focus on clear, smooth and cohesive sonics.



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Power cable not shown.

**QLED TV**





Can a sub-£500 home cinema projector actually be any good? **John Archer** finds out

# BenQ's 1080p bargain beamer

The appeal of the BenQ W1050 projector is brutally simple. It delivers video-tuned pictures at kingly screen sizes for just £500. The question is: should true home cinema fans be excited about such a budget model, or is it really aimed just at the casual crowd? More to the point, has the AV world now got to a level where quality largescreen visuals cost the same as a premium console and a couple of games?

As you'd expect of a projector that knows it's more likely to live in and out of cupboards rather than being part of a permanent installation, the W1050 is small and portable. It's cute sculpting and all-white livery, though, ensure that it cuts an attractive dash on your coffee table on movie nights or big sporting occasions.

The W1050's connections are all found on its rear, and comprise twin HDMI, a D-Sub PC port, RS-232 control jack and composite video ports. This is pretty much in line with what you get on many substantially more expensive projectors, although a 12V trigger is absent.

There are a few price-related set up limitations, too. For starters, there's no vertical optical image shifting, leaving a couple of screw-down legs to the rear and a drop-down foot under its front edge to help you get the image positioned correctly on your wall or screen.

This limitation will likely force you to use the projector's keystone correction to get the sides of the picture straight, even though this essentially involves digitally distorting the video signal.

There's also only 1.2x of optical zoom available, meaning some households may have to move their coffee table around to ensure the projector delivers the right image size. To help you figure out if this might be you, I can tell you that the W1050 delivers a 100in image from a throw distance of between 2.8m and 3.36m.

Setup also brings you into first contact with the W1050's deeply unhelpful remote control. This horrible little thing has no backlighting and is dominated by over-small, unhelpfully organised, poorly labelled buttons, making it all but impossible to use in a dark room.

The W1050 picks up the pace with its picture specifications. Its DLP optical system delivers a Full HD resolution (we're not yet at the 4K-for-£500 stage, unfortunately), as well as a promising claimed contrast

ratio of 15,000:1. Its high 2,200 Lumens of claimed brightness is a big deal too, as it proves enough to deliver pictures that remain watchable – enjoyable, even – when there's a degree of ambient light in your room. This is an important feature for the 'casual' projection market, even though I'd always urge you to get your room as dark as possible any time you're using a projector.

The W1050 backs up its versatility by providing Sport, Vivid TV and Cinema modes, all quite astutely designed for different content and viewing environments.

One final noteworthy specification is the ability of the six-speed RGBRGB colour wheel and other optical components to deliver a claimed 96 per cent of the standard dynamic range REC.709 colour space.

## Once more unto the beach

Letting the W1050 loose on the 1080p Blu-ray of *Dunkirk* reveals a picture that is comfortably better than you've a right to expect for £500.

Mostly light sequences such as *Dunkirk*'s Spitfire dogfights look really punchy and bright. The mix of grey and blue skies looks luminous and lifelike in a dark environment, but also intense enough to stand proud against a little light pollution if completely blacking out your room simply isn't an option.

The W1050 makes good use of its native Full HD resolution, too. Its images are sharp and crisp enough to show off the subtle difference in grain levels and sharpness between the 1.78:1-ratio *Dunkirk* footage shot on 70mm film and the 2.20:1-ratio footage captured at a lower grade.

Christopher Nolan's 70mm footage – especially the opening shots in *Dunkirk*'s streets – appears detailed and clean; full of texture and depth, but also devoid of any signs of forced sharpness such as ringed object edges or exaggerated grain.

### AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
Budget Full HD DLP projector

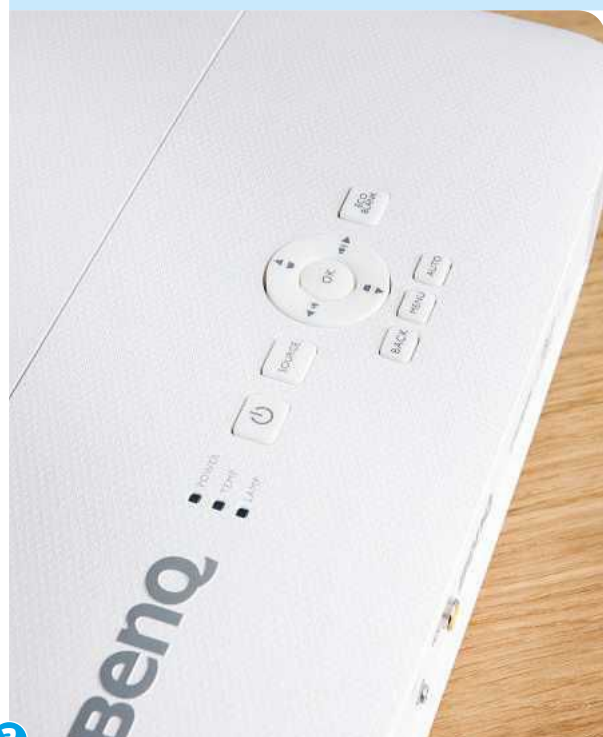
**POSITION:**  
Near the bottom of BenQ's home entertainment line

**PEERS:**  
Optoma HD27;  
Epson EH-TW570

**1. The BenQ adds a claimed 2,200 Lumens to its 1080p resolution**

**2. This remote is crying out for a backlight...**





## SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** Yes. Active shutter **4K:** No. 1,920 x 1,080 **HDR:** No **CONNECTIONS:** 2 x HDMI inputs; composite video input; USB service port; D-Sub PC input; RS-232; 3.5mm audio in/out **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 2,200 Lumens **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** 15,000:1 **ZOOM:** 1.2x **DIMENSIONS:** 332.4(w) x 99(h) x 214.3(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 2.56kg

**FEATURES:** Single-chip DLP optical engine; built-in speaker; 4,500/6,000/10,000-hour lamp life in Normal/Eco/Smart Eco modes respectively; 33dB claimed fan noise in Normal mode; 31dB claimed fan noise in Eco mode; Cinema, Sports and Vivid TV picture presets; 1.37-1.64:1 throw ratio; motion processing tech; 210W UHP lamp; vertical keystone correction

## PARTNER WITH



**PANASONIC DMP-UB300:** You can now snaffle this 2017 Panasonic disc spinner for around £150 – a bargain considering its 4K playback skills. Okay, that won't get use with the W1050, but the compact form is great for a stealth setup.

3

The W1050's freedom from noise extends into three other key areas. First, I only rarely spotted momentary traces of single-chip DLP's 'rainbow effect', where red, green and blue striping can appear over stand-out bright objects (such as the bright bullet holes in the dark hull of the small boat Harry Styles and his *Dunkirk* chums hide in).

Second, dark scenes look pleasingly free of the green dotting noise cheap DLP projectors can suffer with. Third, there's hardly any fizzing noise over skin tones during camera pans – another common budget DLP projection problem.

**'The BenQ W1050's colour palette is engagingly rich, neutral, subtle and clearly tuned for video use'**

The W1050's contrast performance gives us the clearest glimpse at the projector's budget origins. There's a gentle pall of greyness over dark scenes such as the one in *Dunkirk* where survivors of a night-time torpedo attack flounder in the water waiting to be rescued. And this greyness is heavy enough to obscure shadow detail in the darkest corners, leaving them looking hollow at times.

Typically with a BenQ projector I'd use its Smart Eco picture setting to get the most satisfying contrast results. Oddly, though, with the W1050 I preferred the lowest-brightness Eco setting – at least during dark-room viewing – since this generates much less running noise than any other mode and gives by far the most convincing black colours.

There's a catch with this whereby having to take as much brightness out of the picture as the Eco mode does also substantially reduces the punch of bright shots. In the end, though, it proves more important to try and make the image look more evened out across dark and light scenes, than to try to force it into delivering a wider contrast range than it's comfortable with.

The W1050 is also different from most other BenQ projectors where its picture presets are concerned. Usually I'd use BenQ's Cinema mode, but with the W1050 that crushes out too much shadow detail. Instead I'd suggest the User 2 preset as your most balanced starting point, and experimenting from there.

Colour performance is an area where this budget PJ seems much more assured. Aside from some occasional bleaching caused by that residual greyness over dark scenes (that remains even after you've optimised the projector's settings), the W1050's colour palette is engagingly rich, neutral, subtle and clearly tuned for video use ahead of PC use. This is refreshing, considering the more 'business presentation' tones you sometimes suffer with affordable projectors making a play at the home cinema market.

In keeping with most budget PJs, the W1050 carries a built-in speaker to save you having to connect your image source to an external sound system. Yet the sound from this is so puny that you'll struggle to hear it even when you're sat right next to the projector. There's no bass either, and while there's a marginal sense of the sound projecting beyond the confines of the unit's bodywork, it still feels very dislocated from the onscreen action.

## Immersive fun

I should probably veer back to the W1050's £500 price. While BenQ's latest projector is inevitably limited in some ways, these limitations (or at least its picture ones) aren't nearly as severe as you'd expect for so little money. Watching super-sized films and sporting events on it is immersive fun, just a little rough around the edges. Be prepared to play hunt the remote, and locate a space for the PJ in your room, and you'll find it easy to enjoy ■

**3. On-body controls are handily placed for coffee table setups**

## HCC VERDICT



### BenQ W1050

→ £500 → [www.benq.co.uk](http://www.benq.co.uk)

**WE SAY:** This cute BenQ's pictures are much easier on the eye than you might expect. Not flawless, though, and you'll want to avoid using its in-built speaker if possible.





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Wharfedale's commitment to affordable surround sound cheers **Ed Selley**

# Size isn't everything

It wasn't too long ago that an entry-level AVR partnered with a sub/sat speaker package was the default starting position for home cinema thrills. As such, any self-respecting speaker brand had one in its inventory. Yet times change – soundbars have left the compact home cinema option looking a bit less compact.

Not everybody has abandoned the old ways, though. Wharfedale made us very happy with its DX-ISE array [HCC #267 – and our 2016/2017 Best Compact Speaker System award winner], which was very much in the classic sub/sat system mould, and it has now clearly felt that the design had more to offer, so has released the DX-2.

On the face of it, it doesn't look like too much has changed. You still get five little speakers and a subwoofer. But Wharfedale says that a lot of what you see is different – including cabinet designs, drivers that have been 'fine-tuned', and boosted subwoofer power.

So, at £450, is this is a tempting proposition?

## Compact convention

In terms of speaker design, the DX-2 doesn't push any boundaries. It features two pairs of compact satellites that function as left and right channels, front and rear. Each is a two-way design, with a 0.75in soft dome tweeter and 3in woven polypropylene midbass driver, and looks like a shrunken bookshelf speaker. These satellites are joined by a dedicated centre, which adds a second 3in midbass driver to the spec rather than simply placing a satellite on its side.

The system is completed by the WH-D8 active subwoofer. In a world of multi-driver monsters with output power in the kilowatts, a sub with a single 8in driver and 70W (150W peak) amplifier might not stir the blood,

but this is still rather more subwoofer than some soundbar rivals possess. Most importantly, it feels like a properly engineered device. The sealed cabinet is mounted on feet that are pliant enough to isolate it from the outside world, and ensure it doesn't make a bid for freedom if you crank the levels up. You also get a crossover control, a phase switch and the ability to bypass the auto on/off function – although, it has to be said, this works pretty well.

The WH-D8 is going to be pretty busy in a system of this nature because the output of the satellites doesn't drop especially low. Wharfedale quotes a lower response of 120Hz (+/- 3dB) and 100Hz at a more severe roll-off (+/- 6dB). As this means the sub's output is likely to be at least partially directional, I found it does its best work on axis with the front speakers.

Crucially, the DX-2 package doesn't feel cheap. The finish of the satellites is fair, with a gloss-black front panel brightened up with chrome trim rings. I'm less sold on the leatherette wrap on the cabinets, but it's largely unobtrusive and the speakers themselves seem solid and well made.

At the moment, the DX-2 is available in black, as pictured, but a white finish is due to surface too.

The speakers can be wall-mounted via keyhole fixings, and they benefit from decently rugged speaker terminals. There are no spring-clip holes here.

Overall, I'd argue the Wharfedale system is built to a standard that is entirely competitive with soundbars in the £600-£700 range. This is important because the benefits of separate receivers and speakers are worth repeating. Not only can they offer authentic surround sound, they're likely to offer better connectivity, improved stereo performance and the ability to be upgraded independently of one another. Wharfedale has an eye on this already, and has announced that an extra pair of DX-2 satellites will be available for £100 to enable expansion to 7.1.

## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
Compact 5.1  
speaker package

**POSITION:**  
Entry-level, below  
the larger Diamond 11  
HCP sub/sat system

**PEERS:**  
Tannoy HTS-101 XP;  
ELAC Cinema 5.1

**7.1in midbass drivers  
and 0.75in tweeters  
are used across the set**



Against this, you do have the greater complexity and cabling to consider, but installing a setup of this ilk is not exactly arduous.

## Turning up the Wick

No less importantly, the DX-2 doesn't sound cheap either. With the bruising core TrueHD mix of *John Wick: Chapter 2* (Blu-ray), the Wharfedales cover all the basics correctly. With the woofer at the front of the room, I preferred using a 100Hz crossover to a 120Hz setting. I didn't perceive there to be any 'hole' in the system's bass response; the DX-2 instead sounded cohesive and controlled.

The movie's opening chase through the streets of New York is handled well. The engine sounds of the slower cars that Wick's Chevelle overtakes were smoothly passed from speaker to speaker.

The enclosures are, in home cinema terms, fairly small, yet the soundstage delivered never sounds small and creates a convincingly room-filling experience. Sure, there are limits. The sequence where Wick falls back through the catacombs can reach the maximum level of what the satellites are capable of handling, meaning they sound more congested, but the volume level that this occurs at is fairly substantial.

It is also worth noting that this limit is much more on the part of the satellites than the subwoofer. The WH-D8 bass bin does a superb job all the way from its handover to the satellites, down to the point where energy is felt rather than heard. It sounds larger and more potent than you would expect, and balances this with a likeable sense of agility and speed.

This all means that the DX-2 is well equipped to tackle fast-paced but deft movie moments. The sequence where Joy and Sadness are ejected from the headquarters in Pixar's *Inside Out* (Blu-ray) convinces, with the speakers nailing the movement of the memory balls and general sense of disarray while keeping the score and dialogue distinct from the wider effects.

The use of a dedicated centre speaker really pays dividends in situations like this. Sharing drivers across the front soundstage keeps it uniform tonally, resulting in a robust, believable sound with smooth transitions, and dialogue that's never lost in the mix even when things get hectic.

The system maintains its clear and cohesive presentation with things like Sky's deranged (but weirdly watchable) *Britannia*; is a satisfying listen late at night with

## SPECIFICATIONS

### DX-2 Satellite

**DRIVE UNITS:** 0.75in soft dome tweeter; 3in woven polypropylene midbass driver  
**ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 120Hz-20kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 84dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 60W **DIMENSIONS:** 120(w) x 190(h) x 122(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 2kg

### DX-2 Centre

**DRIVE UNITS:** 0.75in soft dome tweeter; 2 x 3in woven polypropylene midbass drivers **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 120Hz-20kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 86dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 60W **DIMENSIONS:** 310(w) x 120(h) x 122(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 2.7kg

### WH-D8

**DRIVE UNITS:** 8in front-firing doped paper woofer **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 40Hz-120Hz **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 70W **REMOTE CONTROL:** No **DIMENSIONS (INCLUDING FEET/GRILLE):** 268(w) x 328(h) x 322(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 7.8kg **FEATURES:** Stereo phono input; crossover control; phase switch; auto on/off

## PARTNER WITH



**MARANTZ NR-1508:** Available for around £350, this slimline receiver packs the five channels of grunt to set the DX-2 package on its way. Also on the feature list are HEOS multiroom support, 4K HDR-capable HDMI and hi-res streaming.

the volume dropped low; and turns in a decent presentation with music too. That well-judged handover between satellites and woofer ensures an impressively fulsome delivery of Kraftwerk's *Aero Dynamik* (FLAC, 3-D *The Catalogue*), with its bassline rolling along nicely with no sense of overhang or delay, nor any obvious feeling of there being three speakers rather than two. With the more considered and relaxed *Losing to You* by Stars, the DX-2 delivers the vocal centre of the song with surprising scale and genuine realism, given the dinky nature of the satellites. As with film use, you can push the speakers to run out of headroom, but the sub remains as unburstable as ever.

This 2.1 performance naturally isn't as refined or largescale as that of a pair of floorstanding speakers, but it is achieved while taking up an awful lot less space in the room. And it's more than good enough to balance some stereo listening along with multichannel.

## A slice of home cinema

Again, Wharfedale has got the balance between price and performance bang on. The sonic chops of this sub-£500 package are considerable, while styling is good and setup fuss-free. There are speaker wires to run and an AVR to budget for, but the DX-2 is not so much bigger or more cumbersome than a high-end soundbar, while offering much more flexibility. This gives buyers a real slice of home cinema joy at a very sensible price point. Like its predecessor, it's a bit of a bargain ■

**2. The 2kg satellite speakers offer single keyhole fixings for wall-mounting**



## HCC VERDICT



### Wharfedale DX-2

→ £450 → [www.wharfedale.co.uk](http://www.wharfedale.co.uk)

**WE SAY:** Wharfedale's DX-2 is well priced, easy to live with and – most importantly – sounds absolutely superb for the money. A fine choice for an affordable AV system.



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# Epson adds laser to the short-throw mix

The EH-LS100 ultra-short-throw laser projector may look a bit like an office worker on sabbatical, but you need to see past that and enjoy what it can do, says [Steve May](#)

**THE EH-LS100 IS** a pro-AV ultra-short-throw (UST) projector demobbed for consumer use.

Similarities with Epson's straight-laced EB corporate UST projection range, from design through to specification, are obvious. But I'm not complaining. The EH-LS100 is unfeasibly bright and gloriously over-engineered.

These sorts of projectors can be found at both the stratospherically high-end of the projector market, and the more affordable. The incoming Sony LSPX-A1, a 4K laser model, will sell for a giddy \$30,000, while the lamp-based Optoma GT5000 will cost you just £1,000. The EH-LS100 treads a new middle ground. It's a large 3LCD 1080p model that employs a laser light engine. Has Epson found a magic formula, or is this class-defining hopeful a bit too quantum for its own good?

UST projectors are niche but useful. They cast a bigger-than-a-TV image in rooms where the physical layout might prevent a traditional projector install. Barn conversions with vaulted ceilings can be a challenge, but with a UST beamer you can park it right up against the wall. And, of course, you can get up and walk around while it's in use, because you'll never stand in the way of the projected image.

This PJ is solid-feeling (and weighs 11kg) and fairly businesslike in styling, although a few curves soften the blow. Connections run to three HDMI inputs (one with MHL), enough for a Blu-ray player, set-top box and media player/games console, as well as VGA in/out, USB (for JPEG and AVI file playback) and composite. Be aware that the inputs are recessed down under, so you won't be casually plugging HDMI's in and out.

As with all UST projectors, setup is straightforward. The projector sits square to a wall, so you'll not need scads of keystone correction, although there is +/-3% horizontal and vertical adjustment provided. If you want extra height, you can raise the feet, and there's arc correction for other geometric anomalies. A focus lever, located under a latch by the air filter, snaps everything into sharp relief.

Images might typically be thrown between 70in and 130in. Their size is dictated by how far away from your wall you put the PJ. It works from just 6cm. I found I could effectively fill the best part of an entire room wall (bigger than I could physically measure), casting from 48cm. Even with the image at this size, there was no visible pixel structure. The panel is a 0.67in 3LCD device with a 16:10 aspect ratio, so you get a slight grey border top and bottom.

## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
Laser-illuminated  
ultra-short-throw  
projector

**POSITION:**  
The most affordable  
Epson laser model,  
below LS10500

**PEERS:**  
Optoma GT5000;  
Epson EH-TW9300



While best results will be achieved beaming onto a fixed screen, that's not really how the EH-LS100 is intended to be used. Sat before a white wall, the display melts from view when not in use.

## Burning desire

Fired up, this is astonishingly bright, a consequence of that corporate DNA – Epson quotes a white and colour light output of 4,000 Lumens, coupled to a 2,500,000:1 contrast ratio. Even in a brightly lit room, images remained entirely watchable. It's more a media room solution than hardcore home theatre.

With all that brightness comes some notable running noise. Select any of the Dynamic, Bright Cinema or Game viewing modes and the Epson ticks over at a high 39dB. This is certainly too loud to comfortably enjoy a movie, but it drops to a more accommodating 30dB in Cinema mode. At this point an external sound system would go some way to masking its output, but it's still not ideal.

A supplementary Light Source Mode offers selections for Normal, Quiet, Extended and Custom brightness. On anything other than Quiet, the projector immediately goes into noisy fan hyperdrive. In Quiet mode, brightness drops to 2,800 Lumens – actually still as potent as many conventional projectors.

A laser light source means the EH-LS100's lifespan is conservatively rated at 20,000 hours, so you'll never need to worry about maintenance. And the brand suggests that there will be no drop in brightness or colour intensity over a ten-year period. Judicious use of its lower power settings can, we're told, extend laser life to approximately 30,000 hours.

Another benefit of a laser over a lamp is near-instant on, so no warm-up time is required.

There's inevitably a limit to this PJ's black level performance, but subjective contrast is high. In fact, the EH-LS100 positively shines with vivid content. Yellow-orange fireballs arc across the sky at the opening of *Transformers: The Last Knight* (Blu-ray), exploding red on the battlefield. When Merlin rides to confront the Ghidorah Transformer, the hillside is verdant green. Sometimes the colours are a bit unsuited, but this projector knows how to do pretty.

Image adjustments include the usual parameters (brightness, contrast, saturation and sharpness, etc). There's also variable Dynamic Contrast, but there seems to be no compelling reason to move away from its fastest option. For deeper control, you can access RGBCMY and gamma tweaks from Epson's advanced menu.

I'm struck while using it just how easily the EH-LS100 brings big images home. It's tailor-made for large, open-plan rooms, the kind of designer space where big floorstanding speakers seem at home but a 55in TV would look sadly lost.

*Britannia* is given scale and impact, this cinematic Sky Atlantic original series conveyed with good detail. Fill your wall with Mackenzie Crook's druid prosthetics and you get

## SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** No **4K:** No, 1,920 x 1,200 **HDR:** No **CONNECTIONS:** 3 x HDMI inputs (1 x MHL compatible); VGA input; VGA output; composite input; stereo minijack input; stereo minijack output; RS-232; Ethernet; 3 x USB **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 4,000 Lumens **CONTRAST (CLAIMED):** 2,500,000:1 **Zoom:** 1.35x (digital) **DIMENSIONS:** 494(w) x 188(h) x 437(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 11kg

**FEATURES:** 3LCD projector; laser light source; 16W built-in speaker; claimed laser 'lamp' life of 20,000 hours (30,000 hours in Eco); 30dB minimum claimed fan noise; Dynamic, Bright Cinema, Cinema and Game picture presets; JPEG picture view (via USB); manual vertical and horizontal keystone correction; 70in-130in image size; compatible with Epson's iProjection app

## PARTNER WITH



**EPSON iPROJECTION:** Not only does this free app (iOS/Android) enable smart device control of the PJ's menu and source selection, it also offers screen mirroring functionality. Just put the EH-LS100 on your network and you're in business.



a sense of the craftsmanship in the production, so easy to miss on a smaller screen.

Seth MacFarlane's space romp *The Orville* (Fox HD), which has a ravishing colour palette, similarly looks ace. In deep space sequences the dazzling ships and glowing planets

help to mask the less-than-stellar black level.

Admittedly, it would be nice to see a 4K iteration, but as Epson has only just got around to unveiling a native 3LCD 4K projector (for the commercial market) this would seem a way off. And even *faux* 2160p image processing would ratchet up the hardware cost.

Furthermore, it's Full HD performance is fine for Blu-ray and HD TV. That smooth, photographic presentation doesn't lack for clarity; there's no pixel grit or screen-door grain. Its inherent brightness makes this a media room projector in the truest sense, bringing monster images to rooms that are multifunctional spaces.

For convenience, there's a 16W sound system onboard which makes a functional noise, but, as mentioned earlier, the EH-LS100 obviously deserves to be hooked up to something more powerful.

## A PJ like no other

While the price tag positions this model against lower-cost 4K DLP projectors, this UST laser PJ offers something rather different. It's designed for well-lit environments, and is itself both astonishingly bright and rudely colourful. Maybe every white wall should have one ■

1. The EH-LS100 can cast an image up to a massive 130in

2. The PJ's three HDMI inputs should be enough to handle your AV sources

## HCC VERDICT



### Epson EH-LS100

→ £2,600 → [www.epson.co.uk](http://www.epson.co.uk)

**WE SAY:** Epson's bright, colour-rich UST laser projector is just the ticket if you want mega images with minimal home cinema faff, although this suits locating in a room with ambient light.

**Mark Craven** relishes the idea of a wireless multichannel experience with JBL's range-topping soundbar system



# Surround sound unbound

JBL's Bar 5.1 aims to bridge the gap between the soundbar norm and a multichannel setup, by the addition of wireless surround speakers that unclip from the main enclosure. The idea being that you can bring these out for movie night, and reattach them to the 'bar afterwards.

It's a concept that we've seen before. In 2013, Philips introduced its HTL9100, matching a soundbar (with detachable surrounds) to a subwoofer. Two years later, it followed with the Fidelio B5. Now JBL has embraced the

idea. It's also embraced the £600 price tag that Philips assigned for its multipurpose products.

The USP of the Bar 5.1 is that its surround speakers are entirely cable-free. Unlike the wireless accessory packs offered with some soundbars, these don't require a mains power connection. Instead, they charge their internal battery when docked to the 'bar. JBL says to get to a full charge takes around three hours, and subsequently offers around ten hours of playback. They will go into standby (or power down) if not receiving a signal after 10 and 20 minutes respectively, helping to keep their juice levels up, and can be physically powered down via a switch on their bodywork. But note that they only charge when the 'bar is



## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
Soundbar/subwoofer  
with 5.1 mode

**POSITION:**  
Top of JBL's new  
range of soundbars

**PEERS:**  
Philips Fidelio B5;  
Samsung  
HW-MS650

in standby mode, not powered up, which might be a bit of an irritation.

When the surrounds are locked to the soundbar unit, the whole shebang measures over a metre wide. Styling is quite neat, however, with a slim, curved, black-wrapped chassis topped off by source, volume and power buttons, and a JBL logo on the front. A scrolling display appears to the right of this, peeking through the grille, large enough to read from across a room.

Controlling the Bar 5.1 is via a remote that impresses with its layout (and separate volume controls for subwoofer and wireless surround), but feels about as rugged in the hand as a plastic toy from a box of cornflakes.

Boosting usability is the soundbar's generous connectivity. There's Bluetooth, which is par for the course these days, but also a USB input for music playback. To connect to a display, there's either optical digital audio or HDMI ARC, the latter joined by a trio of HDMI inputs able to pass 4K HDR signals.

There are 11 drivers split across the soundbar and its two surround buddies. The L/C/R channels each get a pair of 3in x 1.75in racetrack drivers and 0.75in tweeter. There are no height pretensions here (Atmos or otherwise); all are front-facing – something to remember when positioning the single-driver (midbass) surround modules.

The subwoofer, which stands 44cm high and around 30cm deep, perhaps seems a little outsized compared to the svelte soundbar. But its portly figure is justified by its 10in downfiring woofer, larger than most designs found in soundbar packages. It connects wirelessly to the 'bar. There's a pairing button on its rear, below a large port, but I didn't once have to press this.

So, depending on how your AV source gear is configured, you could set up the Bar 5.1 with just a single wire from your TV, and no other cable spaghetti to worry about beyond mains leads. Neat.

## Bass layer

Unsurprisingly, the JBL Bar 5.1's 10in subwoofer has a lot of impact on the system's overall performance. Its level is adjustable from 0-30, and is set to 16 on default. This gives you a decent amount of flexibility, and a chance to experiment. I was tempted to keep the sub running hot to round out the performance of the other drivers (and because, erm, I like bass), but this naturally means it can suddenly sound over-bearing during weighty moments. I ended up with it set at 17.

Explosions, punches, LFE swells, crumbling buildings... the Bar 5.1 loves them all. It has a gutsy attitude, and imparts generous scale to onscreen action, while sounding pleasingly tight. The climactic fight between Creed and Conlan in *Creed* (Blu-ray), sees boxing gloves land with taut, meaty thwacks.

The Bar 5.1 surround enclosures may be small, and use only a single driver, but they get the job done. When mounted to the 'bar, the soundstage is entirely in front of you; switch to 5.1 mode (which is as easy as just removing

**'Explosions, punches, LFE swells, crumbling buildings... the Bar 5.1 loves them all – and sounds pleasingly tight'**

the speakers and placing them either side of your seating position) and the 360-degree crowd noise of the *Creed* fight (actually the screaming hordes at Everton's Goodison Park, fact fans) immediately becomes apparent. The soundstage envelops. Localised effects, such as Sylvester Stallone's instructions from Creed's corner, come at you left and right; when the score kicks in after a successfully landed punch, it plays out in both surround channels. ➤

1. You can choose to run the Bar 5.1 in stereo or multichannel

2. The 10in subwoofer connects to the soundbar wirelessly



3



3



Again, though, levels have to be managed and distances considered. These speakers are too diddly to be standmounted, and although they are supplied with brackets for wall-mounting, this seems unlikely as they will need to return to their mother ship for power every once in a while. You'll need to put them wherever you can, and unless you have very specifically placed shelves, you won't end up with the recommended ITU configuration.

To tackle this, JBL supplies a setup mic, which sets levels and delay timing based upon speaker position. It's a quick process, and saves you time tweaking volume (particularly as the remote doesn't allow for isolated adjustment of the left and right surround). It improved the balance in my room, but I still felt that soundmixes with very aggressive surround info, such as the helicopter crash sequence in *Kong: Skull Island* (Blu-ray), could dominate the performance at the expense of front soundstage delivery. With this disc, I had to lower the level manually.

Furthermore the surround speakers have a different overall characteristic, where their audio sounds more shut in than that of the main 'bar. Get them too loud in the mix, and this can be obvious at times.

Some trial and error is therefore required, and more user input (even as far as repositioning speakers) than you'd usually expect from an AVR-driven system. At times, however, the multichannel presentation of JBL's package slots lushly into place. With *Blue Planet II* (UHD Blu-ray), I was pleasingly cocooned within its soggy 5.1 soundscapes, where Hans Zimmer's score battles against ocean sprays and clicking dolphins.

### Let's play the music

The Bar 5.1 has sound presets for Music, Movie, Standard, Voice, Sports and Night. When using the soundbar in

### SPECIFICATIONS

**DRIVE UNITS:** 6 x 3in x 1.75in racetrack midbass drivers (L/C/R); 3 x 0.75in tweeters (L/C/R); 2 x 3in x 1.75in midbass (surround L/R) **AMPLIFICATION (CLAIMED):** 510W (300W subwoofer, 210W soundbar) **CONNECTIONS:** 3 x HDMI inputs; HDMI ARC output; optical digital audio input; 3.5mm input; USB **DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA:** Yes/Yes. Downmixed to 5.1 core **SEPARATE SUBWOOFER:** Yes, 10in driver, ported cabinet **REMOTE CONTROL:** Yes **DIMENSIONS:** 1,148(w) x 58(h) x 93(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 3.9kg

**FEATURES:** 4K HDR passthrough over HDMI; Bluetooth; 5.1-channel feature; mic-assisted setup; wireless subwoofer connection; EQ presets

### PARTNER WITH



#### SAMSUNG UE49MU7000:

This 49in 4K HDR LCD offers excellent value at its now £800 asking price, combining a smart design with well-judged imagery. Add in the JBL Bar 5.1 (and some sources) and you've got a neat home cinema setup.

5.1 guise, Music and Voice sensibly deliver a mono mix to each enclosure. Night mode aims to flatten dynamics of incoming Dolby and DTS bitstreams, although I found it didn't make much of a real impact.

You might think Music is the way to go with your library of streamed and physical tunes, but in one way I preferred the general frequency balance of Movie regardless of content. Def Leppard's glam rock anthem *Let It Go* (from 1981's *High and Dry*) sounded lightweight with the Music preset engaged, missing out on a fuller, bass-rich presentation. Of course, with this setting, the JBL will matrix out info to feed to those rear channels, and this can sound odd at times – with Michael Jackson's *Billie Jean*, Jacko's main lyric remains front and centre, but some of his occasional vocal tics ('Ow!') are thrown wide. For music sessions, I'd perhaps advise reconnecting the speakers for a straight stereo experience.

And it's with music playback in general that the Bar 5.1 shows up a lack of mid-range presence. As noted earlier, the woofer here is vitally important to the overall soundscape; with numerous tracks I found upper-register bass notes lacking the weight of genuine lows, illustrating a weak point around the crossover between sub and mid-range drivers. Treble info can sound more dominant.

### Best of both worlds?

JBL's Bar 5.1 is a better bet for movie playback – which is no doubt the idea. Its impressive subwoofer adds a rich undercurrent to its multichannel staging, and dialogue is another strong point. The surround channels can feel a little underpowered compared to the rest of the array, however, and you'll need to find a spot for them that both works sonically and for your room layout. Definitely worth considering if a separates system is off limits and you still want to savour your 5.1 sources ■

3. Each wireless surround enclosure houses a single midbass driver

### HCC VERDICT



#### JBL Bar 5.1

→ £600 → [www.jbl.com](http://www.jbl.com)

**WE SAY:** A breakaway from the soundbar norm – excellent connectivity, a strong subwoofer and wire-free 5.1 sonics are the main attractions here.





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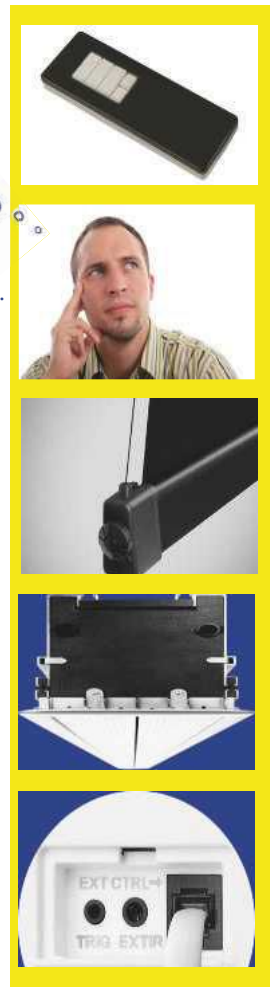
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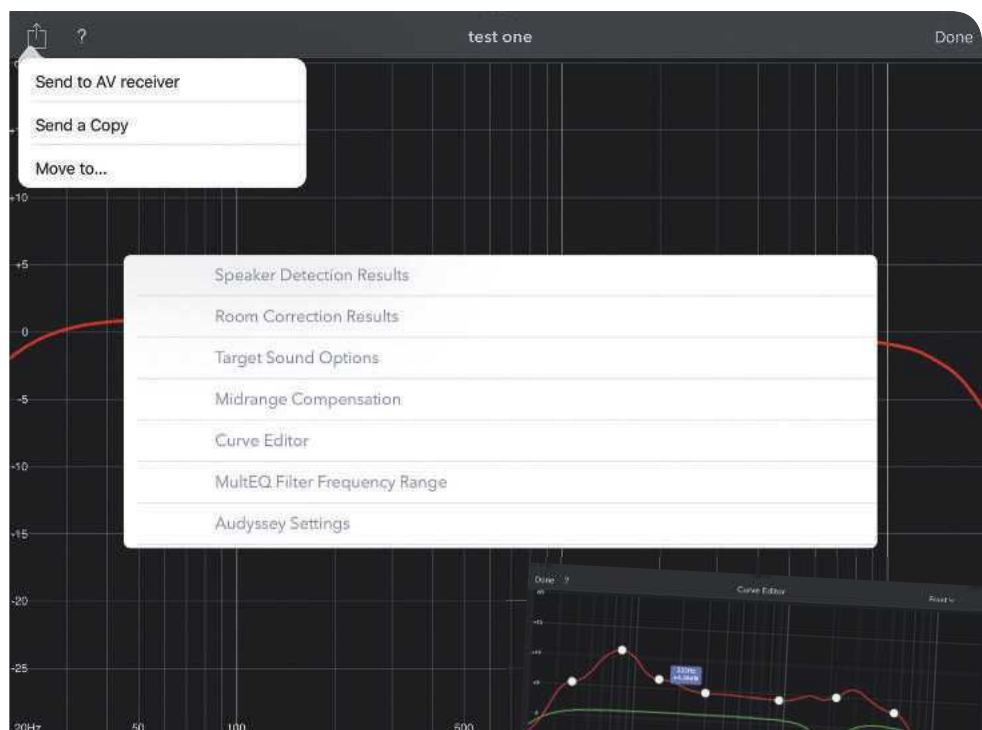
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# EQ on demand

**Richard Stevenson** rustles up £20 to unlock greater control of his AVR's Audyssey EQ – but can an app really pack in everything a dedicated tweaker requires?



**BILLED AS THE** next generation of room acoustic calibration, Audyssey's MultEQ Editor app expands on the fettling and control abilities of the standard MultEQ package supplied with Denon and Marantz AVRs. It will only work with the latest iteration of Audyssey MultEQ (2016 onwards), your AVR needs to be on the network and, unless you have small fingers and fantastic eyesight, it's a lot easier to use on a tablet than a phone.

The app costs £20 but bundles most of the tools that once featured in the £600 installer-only Audyssey Pro Kit. Sounds like a bargain, so is it worth it? Well, possibly.

The app-based AVR setup process is

absolutely identical to the normal Audyssey MultEQ system, right down to the GUI graphics. You do need to start afresh, though, as the app won't upload your existing setup data from the AVR. That is a little odd as the AVR still does the actual room measurement and

number crunching, and then uploads the new data back to the app.

The real flexibility comes after setup. There's a whole host of graphs to show you what the Audyssey EQ is doing, a cornucopia of tweaker, and the ability to save a massive number of different setups. Fancy creating different EQ, channel balance and target curves for a dozen different genres? No problem.

Pull up your favoured setup and you get a series of tab options covering the regular physical speaker results and graphs of the before/after room correction, channel by channel. You get the ability to edit the EQ curves with up to 10 filters per channel, add midrange compensation, apply target curves and adjust HF roll-off.

The before/after sound curves are really interesting for those with a penchant for getting into the nitty-gritty of room measurement. However, the 'after' graphs were all impossibly flat in my tests. Having played with more real time analysers (RTAs)

## SPECIFICATIONS

**DEVICE SUPPORT:** Works with Denon & Marantz AVRs with MultEQ XT – models released from 2016 onwards only

**APP PLATFORM:** Apple (iOS 8.0 or later, iPad, iPhone, iPod Touch); Android (4.0 upwards)

**FEATURES:** Target curve editing; HF roll-off control; mid-range compensation; frequency range EQ limit set; save/upload unlimited configurations

and EQ systems than I care to mention in the cinema room, I can safely say it is not possible to EQ such near-perfectly flat in-room responses with parametric filters.

I had to check, though. Running Real RTA software on a laptop with a calibrated DBX mic and Roland 24/192 USB audio interface, the measured in-room responses for every channel were much lumpier than the app would have you believe. The Audyssey results looked *too* good.

Thankfully, tweaks from the app are much more useful. The curve editor for each speaker, including subwoofer, allows you to place filters at your chosen frequency and drag the gain up or down. The original target curve remains a green line and you create a new red-line curve. Hours of fun – however, it's somewhat tricky to hit the right frequency with a chunky finger and there is no adjustment for the Q factor (essentially the shape of the curve) of each filter. Nor is there any feedback as to how these filters might pan out in the reality of your room, as the system doesn't re-measure after adjustment.

Other tweaks include one of two HF roll-off curves for a more cinematic sound, midrange compensation to tame frequencies around 2kHz and the ability to control Audyssey's working HF frequency limit. All good but hardly essential.

## Audio expansion

The Audyssey MultEQ Editor app certainly expands on the user-adjustment side of Audyssey EQ and allows you to save different setups to your heart's content. Yet the overall level of control is limited, the after-measurement curves seem 'ambitious' and it costs twenty quid, which you might have expected to be waived if you've just bought a £2,000 AVR. Alternatively, it's not ruinously expensive, which might be the prompt you need to give it a whirl ■

## AV INFO

### PRODUCT:

App expansion of Audyssey MultEQ for Denon/Marantz hardware

### POSITION:

Step-up from onboard EQ system

### PEERS:

Pioneer MCACC Pro; Dirac Live

## HCC VERDICT



### Audyssey MultEQ Editor

→ £20 → [www.denon.co.uk](http://www.denon.co.uk) / [www.marantz.co.uk](http://www.marantz.co.uk)

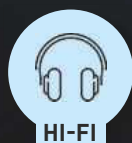
**WE SAY:** Plenty of options for the itinerant EQ tweaker but Audyssey's MultEQ Editor feels limited compared to some standard EQ systems.





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# OLED in style

The Bild 3.55 may be the most affordable Loewe OLED TV yet, but the brand hasn't forgotten to add designer bells and whistles. **Steve May** laps up the luxury



**LOEWE PRESENTS ITSELF** as an auteur in the field of TV design. Celebrating minimalism long before it was fashionable, the German brand has carved a unique niche under the guidance of creative director Bodo Sperlein. But it's a precarious gambit, particularly now that mainstream brands like Sony and LG have started to play the same game.

Loewe's answer is the Bild 3, an entry-level of sorts for its designer tellies.

The Bild 3 line actually spans both OLED (the 55in 4K 3.55 model reviewed here) and smaller LED LCD sets (the 3.49 and 3.43). In terms of cosmetics, they look identical.

The screen sits neatly on a pedestal with helpful swing action. A forward-facing speaker array (it's not really a soundbar) is finished in fabric. The company logo is relocated to

a small tag on the top right of the ultra-thin bezel, like you'd find on a designer shirt...

Connections include four HDMI, all HDCP 2.2 compliant, plus micro AV, three USBs, Ethernet and digital audio output. The tuner choice is Freeview or generic HD satellite. Wi-Fi

is standard, but Bluetooth headphone compatibility is a welcome extra.

Loewe has its own TV OS, which is fittingly esoteric. It offers 4K YouTube and Amazon Video, but the Netflix client is browser-based. Other services include BBC iPlayer, Tidal, Deezer and the Berliner Philharmoniker. Loewe points out that firmware will bring new apps, so less could become more.

Picture quality, as we've grown to expect generally from OLED, is striking. The blacks are perfectly profound and colour vibrancy is high.

Of the supplied image presets, the Home mode offers the best APL (average picture level) for SDR 4K and HD. I really didn't care for the Cinema option, as it drains the screen of contrast; with 4K content, this subjectively robs images of resolution.

All presets lock to HDR Bright, HDR Dark and HDR Premium options with high dynamic range content.

The Bild 3.55's HDR performance is extremely impressive. I measured a peak luminance figure of 749 nits with a 5 per cent white window. This translates to naturalistic spectral highlights with considerable eye-candy appeal. Loewe doesn't submit, as policy, TVs for Ultra HD Premium certification, but this model clearly exceeds the required luminance benchmark.

In addition to HDR10, the screen supports HLG and Dolby Vision.

## SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** No **4K:** Yes, 3,840 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; HLG; Dolby Vision **TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD; satellite HD **CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI inputs; AV output; Ethernet; optical digital audio output **SOUND (CLAIMED):** 2 x 40W **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** N/A **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** N/A **DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,230(w) x 742(h) x 98(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 20.6kg

**FEATURES:** Built-in Wi-Fi; Bluetooth headphone support; Loewe TV OS smart portal; Image+ Active picture processing; optional DR+ PVR upgrade

## Loewe's smaller Bild 3 models use LED panels

There are the usual image adjustments to experiment with, along with Image+ Active, a bespoke Loewe mode with Soft, Normal, Extended and Intensive settings. This can lead to even greater contrast punch, but seemingly at the expense of near-black shadow detail.

There's also DMM image interpolation, which, like a topical ointment, comes in Soft, Middle and Intensive strengths. It's an effective de-judder treatment, but tends to add unwanted motion artefacts. To keep things cinematic, I preferred it kept off.

Those wanting to partner the set with a PS4 or Xbox One X should note that while input lag hits a slow 106.5ms on the Home preset, it drops to a more playable 39.9ms in Gaming mode.

The speaker system is surprisingly potent. Power output is rated at 2 x 40W, and the stereo soundstage has excellent clarity. Admittedly, there's no appreciable bass, but for everyday viewing it's excellent.

## Smarten me up

An artful fusion of design and performance, the Bild 3.55 is a striking OLED offering. HDR handling is excellent, while colour fidelity and detail are spectacular. If this Loewe does have an Achilles' heel then it's with that smart portal, but I'm not entirely sure it's a deal-breaker. In many respects, it makes sense to off-load streaming services to an external device anyway.

There's stiff competition on the streets from LG, particularly the still-on-sale (and cheaper) E7/B7 models, but if you're after a panel that's unapologetically premium, the Bild 3.55 ticks all the right boxes ■

## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:** 55in designer OLED 4K with HDR10 and Dolby Vision playback

**POSITION:** Entry-level Bild Series flatscreen

**PEERS:** LG OLED55B7; Philips 55POS9002

## HCC VERDICT



### Loewe Bild 3.55

→ £2,800 → [www.loewe.tv](http://www.loewe.tv)

**WE SAY:** Modernistic design, delicious image quality and decent sound make this highly covetable 55-incher a fit for AV fashionistas.

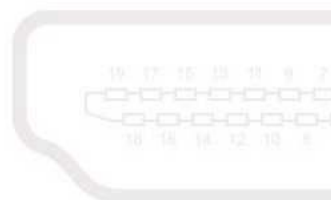




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# 1More H1707

**Ed Selley** enjoys the styling, comfort and bass punch of these unconventional headphones

**HAVING HAD A** strong debut with affordable Bluetooth headphones and earphones, 1More has moved (a little) upmarket and launched the H1707.

This relatively large over-ear design is fitted with three drivers per side, rather than the more conventional one. These take the form of a bass reflex driver of undisclosed size, in front of which sits a 40mm driver made from 'Aerospace Composites.'

The final driver is the most interesting – a Piezo Ceramic tweeter that is intended to allow the 1More to reproduce frequencies up to 40kHz.

The H1707 itself is well assembled and extremely comfortable to wear for extended periods. The black and gold finish is funky, too.



Each earcup has a triple-driver array

As a sealed design, these headphones aren't going to leak sound to the outside world, something which can be a deal-breaker if domestic bliss is important.

## Floor it!

In performance terms, the H1707 does many things right. It motors through *Mad Max*; *Fury Road* with an impressive sense of space for closed-back headphones. Immortan Joe's address from

the citadel is presented in a suitably vast manner. There's no shortage of bass, too. The War Rig positively thunders around the soundfield, and impacts have a crunching sense of weight to them.

What is a little odd, though, is that these cans never seem to have the treble extension that the complex tweeter arrangements suggest they might, and this means that some fine detail can elude them. This is a shame because they're tonally believable across the bulk of the frequency range and hard to provoke into sounding harsh or aggressive.

Overall, a clever pair of headphones with likeable features, but there are designs with a bit more sparkle for the money ■

## HCC VERDICT



### 1More H1707

→ £200 → [1moreuk.com](http://1moreuk.com)

[WWW.SONORO.DE](http://WWW.SONORO.DE)/£900

# Sonoro Meisterstück

Here's a one-box system that really does want to do it all. **Mark Craven** investigates

**GET PAST THE** quirky name and the Meisterstück from German corp Sonoro has quite a lot going for it. It's best thought of as an all-in-one music system, stereo in presentation yet built into a single unit, packing a CD player and armed with more hookups than I suspect most users will know what to do with. On the wireless side you get Bluetooth, DLNA/UPnP, FM/DAB radio, internet radio and Spotify built-in. There are physical inputs, too – USB, optical digital audio (although this speaker is quite chunky to take the place of a soundbar),

Ethernet, 3.5mm and stereo analogue audio. A headphone out on the front fascia is joined by Bluetooth transmission to wireless cans.

Once you've worked out what you want to listen to and how, the Meisterstück puts on quite the performance. Tucked into its hand-crafted cabinet are 0.75in tweeters and 3in midrange units, backed by a 5.25in woofer – each driver gets its own amplifier, with output white-gloved by a DSP engine. The result of all this attention to detail is a substantial and detailed performance, with pleasing dynamics.

From the intro of Dire Straits' *Money For Nothing* (CD), I knew this was a sound I could

enjoy, and when Mark Knopfler's iconic riff kicked in (and that oh-so-funky bassline) I was thanking the Sonoro boffins for endowing this flagship system with genuine bass heft and mid-range drive, which helps distract from a more indistinct HF delivery.

An issue with the Meisterstück, though, is where to put it. At over half a metre wide, it looked a little over-dominant in my kitchen, and too big for a bedside table. Space was found on a shelf in my home office.

The price isn't enticing either – £900 could get you a useful, sweet-sounding multiroom system from HEOS, Yamaha or Sonos, and nor does the Meisterstück support music file playback beyond 16-bit/48kHz, which is perhaps unexpected ■



The colour display is driven by remote or on-body controls

## HCC VERDICT



### Sonoro Meisterstück

→ £900 → [www.sonoro.de](http://www.sonoro.de)



# Kubism

KEF's new subwoofers aim to combine down-firing drivers with advanced DSP for a balanced bass experience.

**Ed Selley** asks Ralph to 'wreck it' with the 10in version



**KEF'S REVISED RANGE** of Kube subwoofers, launched around the same time as its new Q Series speakers, would seem to be a natural fit for the latter – but as the non-specific name implies, they're designed to work with a variety of product lines, and can be purchased individually. The Kube10b auditioned here is the middle of three models, all active and sharing similar traits.

In specification terms this means you get a 10in downward-firing driver powered by a 300W Class D amplifier. A pricier (£700) Kube12b offers a 12in woofer, while the more affordable Kube8b has... well, you get the idea.

The cabinet is sealed, which should help with placement, but KEF has put a great deal more effort into making the Kube10b room-friendly than that. A 56-bit DSP runs custom software that is intended to allow the subwoofer to perform as

effectively as possible by studying the behaviour of the driver, amplifier and cabinet, and optimising them against one another. This also means that a three-position switch can be used to adjust its behaviour in relation to any nearby walls.

Aesthetically, the KEF is black. Really, really black. Now, there is a school of thought that says subwoofers should be heard and not seen, yet the Kube10b really doesn't do much to excite the eye at all, with only the rounded corners and glass top plate counting as 'styling.' It is well-made, though, and pleasingly compact – another aspect that will help with positioning. Connectivity is good (rather than great) with the back panel packing a phase switch, crossover and high- and low-level inputs. There is no remote control or fancy app.

## Anywhere you want me

KEF's onboard DSP functionality does genuinely work. My preferred position for subwoofers in my room is slightly out from the rear corner, and the difference between the KEF's 'wall' and 'corner' settings is considerable and entirely positive. There's no shortage of power either. That tremendous

## SPECIFICATIONS

**DRIVE UNITS:** 1 x 10in doped paper woofer **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed, down-firing **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 24Hz-140Hz (+/- 3dB) **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 300W (RMS) Class D amplifier **REMOTE CONTROL:** No **DIMENSIONS (INCLUDING REAR PANEL AND FEET):** 353(w) x 370(h) x 353(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 17.4kg

**FEATURES:** Stereo phono input; LFE input; speaker-level input; three-position EQ setting; phase switch; crossover control; iBX Intelligent Bass Extension DSP

## Kube by name, cube by nature...

opening bass sound at the beginning of the *Edge of Tomorrow* Blu-ray (also discussed on p29) is captured with a tangible sense of force but without any hint of overhang. And it's the same with another traditional torture test for subwoofers – the bombastic 'Hero's Duty' sequence in *Wreck-it Ralph* (Blu-ray) manages to hang together well with no sense of bloat.

The Kube10b's integration is good across a fairly wide frequency range. The review sample turned up with the Q Series package reviewed in *HCC* #280 and was able to work well with the potent Q750 floorstanding speaker, providing a sense of augmentation despite that model's sizable bass drivers. Equally, with my resident Elipson Planet M satellites and a 90Hz crossover, the KEF performs happily, and has sufficiently little tonal character of its own to blend in.

## Depth charge

The only real catch with the Kube10b is not so much what it does but what it doesn't do. KEF quotes a low-end roll-off of 24Hz but compared to my resident (and more affordable) BK Electronics P12-300SB, it discernibly doesn't have the same effortless low-end extension. I would always rather have a subwoofer that gave me a skilful, controlled performance over one that had vast reserves of grunt but no ability to deliver it sensibly, but the Kube10b has some serious, well-balanced rivals to contend with in this sub-£1,000 category.

It's a solid choice and will work well with a wide selection of speakers, but there is no shortage of competition ■

## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:** 10in, 300W sealed-box subwoofer

**POSITION:** Middle of three subwoofers in KEF's Kube range

**PEERS:** SVS SB-1000; Monitor Audio Bronze W10

## HCC VERDICT



### KEF Kube10b

→ £600 → [uk.kef.com](http://uk.kef.com)

**WE SAY:** The Kube10b is easy to accommodate in your movie room and delivers tight, well-controlled LFE. Not a depth diva, though.

# Accessorize me!

## Headphone amplifiers

**Jon Thompson** treats his ears to a quartet of system add-ons that promise to turn late-night listening into an awe-inspiring experience, rather than a compromise

**THERE ARE ALWAYS** times that we can't have our full speaker system running without neighbours banging on the wall, or family members pulling out the plug. So what's the alternative? Headphones can be high-quality in terms of fidelity and can give a premium speaker system a run for its money. But invest in a premium set and they deserve a little help to get the best out of them...

Typically, your AVR or processor will offer a headphone output. Use this, though, and you might be missing out. On an AVR, for instance, the headphone output is a long way down the list of manufacturer priorities, only turned to once time and money has been spent on power amplifiers, surround sound processing

and HDMI stages. With high-quality 'phones, where impedance can reach up to 600 ohms, even in milliwatt terms you need some welly.

This is where a dedicated headphone amplifier comes into play. Connect one to your AV processor or integrated amp, and you can

'Headphones can be high-quality in terms of fidelity and give premium speakers a run for their money'

better enjoy the true potential of your system via headphones. You need to take a preout from your processor, assign speaker output to L/R only and set speakers to large. Your hardware's decoding silicon will do an amazing job of a 7.1 or 5.1 fold-down into stereo.

There are plenty of options across a wide price range. To offer an overview of the market, I've assembled a foursome from £200 to over £1,500. When testing, I used a custom pair of Sennheiser HD650s, a tuned version of the brand's superb (and, at £400, well priced), open-back cans, with both regular 6.35mm and balanced cables – the two pricier amplifiers here have the necessary four-pin balanced connector.

**WWW.ARCAM.CO.UK/£200**

## Arcam rHead

A recent price drop makes this excellent value – and there's scope to tweak too

**LAST YEAR, ARCAM'S** rHead was selling for around £400, but can now be found for half that price. Tempted? You should be.

It's not much to look at, but the feature set isn't as basic as you might expect. For source connection, it offers two phono inputs and two XLR inputs, with a switch on the back letting you flit between the two. For output, it offers two headphone sockets – full-size 6.35mm and a 3.5mm minijack for headphones that carry that fitting. The latter connection is perhaps useful, but in reality, the reason you've bought an external headphone amp is to get the best from high-quality cans.

The rHead is rated as suitable for designs with impedances from 16 ohms to 600 ohms, claiming a 2,000mW output for the former.

Its sound, tested via that 6.35mm output, was exceptionally detailed, and with real focus



and clarity to its imaging. I always felt like I was still wearing headphones, but not in an unpleasant way. The DTS-HD soundmix of *Dunkirk* (4K BD) was focused and tight; *David Gilmour: Live at Pompeii* (BD), a reference-grade audio platter, was rocking, well separated, and very enjoyable.

The Arcam comes with an external 12V power supply that plugs into the back. So, as

**The rHead offers full-size and 3.5mm outputs**

an experiment, I swapped it with an aftermarket power supply from Baldwin HiFi. The difference was remarkable. Bass gained depth and solidity – there were moments in *Dunkirk* where I felt my head had been blown off, and the crucial kick drum in the Gilmour concert (a good test of any audio equipment is how well it can reproduce a drum kit) sounded solid and real. The system had power and weight to match its fidelity.

For the price, the rHead is mightily impressive. Adding a £300 power supply made it even better.

**HCC VERDICT**



**Arcam rHead**

→ £200 → [www.arcam.co.uk](http://www.arcam.co.uk)



# Heed CanAmp MkII

This black box doesn't offer much in the way of bonus bits, but loves to craft a big soundstage

**UNTIL THAT ARCAM** price cut, this was the most affordable – and most basic – of the headphone amplifiers auditioned. While the Oppo and SPL options feature balanced headphone outputs, and Arcam's rHead offers its 3.5mm output and XLR input, the CanAmp MkII sticks to a single full-size headphone socket tethered to a stereo analogue input, plus a line-level output.

Design wise, it's a bit bland too – black and rectangular, with a depth of 250mm exceeding its more manageable 95mm width. The front panel features nothing more than a status light, volume knob and socket for your cans.

It claims a power output of 300mW into 100 ohms, and should have the grunt to handle my Sennheisers' nominal impedance of 300 ohms. Hook up your processor to the phono connectors, plug in your headphones, and off you go.



The first thing you'll notice from the Heed is a massive soundstage. My headphones sounded big, yet tonally, dynamically and spatially even, with plenty of detail present. The size of the audio actually makes you forget you are wearing headphones, which is the idea, although it felt exaggerated,

**Power is rated at 300mW into 100 ohms**

like being in the midst of a soundstage five miles wide.

With the *Dunkirk* disc, it sounded a tad overblown in this regard, and therefore lacked the focus that the other amps in this test offer. It was a similar experience with *...Live At Pompeii*. The soundstage was vast, although joined by clearly defined, strong bass and excellent vocal clarity.

The CanAmp MkII has its strong points, and its simplicity makes it a doddle to use, but you might expect a little more performance precision considering the asking price.

**HCC VERDICT** ★★★★★

**Heed CanAmp MkII**

→ £330 → [www.heedaudio.com](http://www.heedaudio.com)

WWW.OPPODIGITAL.CO.UK/£1,200

# Oppo HA-1

Step it up a level with this one-box hybrid that impresses when it comes to sheer clarity

As the price suggests, Oppo's HA-1 is not just a headphone amp – it also functions as a hi-res DAC (using ESS Sabre32 Reference chipper), taking a source from coaxial, optical and USB inputs, and as a stereo pre-amp. A supplied remote offers control of volume and inputs.

The HA-1 is coming to the end of its shelf-life, but can be still be found at retailers

(a newer Oppo outboard DAC, the Sonica, drops the headphone output). It's a gorgeous design, with a brushed aluminium chassis framing a full-colour LCD front display. This can be set to display old-school-style VU meters if you fancy. Fun, but at the end of the day, it's the audio quality that counts...

The HA-1 has what can be described as the Oppo house sound. It's very polite, and to me lacks a sense of drive, but the pay-off is

masses of detail and a sense of refinement – almost clinical sounding, as my colleague Steve May also reported with the brand's UDP-205 [HCC #274]. Arcam's rHead makes you want

to dance; this makes you want to tap your feet. It didn't grab me with the David Gilmour disc like the Arcam did, but offers more in the way of sheer detail. With *Dunkirk*, it's the least aggressive of this quartet, but intelligibility is first-rate. I could understand Tom Hardy's dialogue in a way the others could not resolve.

As well as its DAC and pre-amp skills, the Oppo throws in some high-spec connections. Using its balanced four-pin headphone output, with a balanced cable into my Sennheisers, raises the sound quality bar. Meanwhile, an AES digital input shows an understanding of the pro-audio market, offering a superior hookup to traditional digital inputs. It's fully-featured, then, and a superb choice for the heart of a music system.



**HOME CINEMA**  
Choice  
**RECOMMENDED**

**HCC VERDICT** ★★★★★

**Oppo HA-1**

→ £1,200 → [www.oppodigital.co.uk](http://www.oppodigital.co.uk)

# SPL Phonitor X

Want to get the sound of invisible floorstanders? This clever device is your friend

Based in Germany, SPL has been making studio monitoring equipment for years and is now entering the consumer AV market. Its Phonitor 2 headphone monitor has been, for some time, considered a reference in mastering studios. With the Phonitor X it hopes to transfer that reputation into the (high-end) home.

It's available in black, silver or red guises. Outputs are 6.35mm and four-pin balanced headphone options, while inputs are stereo XLR and phono. For simple control, it will learn volume commands from existing remotes.

This device is a technological *tour de force*. An example is its unique Phonitor-Matrix option, which is designed to make the sound match that of traditional loudspeakers. You can control the crossfeed from the left and right speakers and the angle the cabinets would sit at. On paper it may sound like a gimmick, but it actually works well and creates a very natural soundfield, effectively giving the impression of sound emanating from in front of you. Of course, if you don't like this feature, it can be turned off.



## The SPL is a tweaker's paradise

The ticking watch of Hans Zimmer's score sat perfectly in the mix, clear but never annoying.

As for David Gilmour: *Live At Pompeii*, it was the next best thing to actually being there. Through the

Phonitor X it sounded like the Pink Floyd founder was wielding his guitar in front of me; real and powerful drums pounding behind, the mix dripping with unlimited detail. Adding to the complexity of the Phonitor X is the fact that it can be bought either with (£1,950) or without (£1,650) an in-built DAC, giving you the option of USB, coaxial and optical digital stereo inputs supporting 192kHz/24-bit. As this also delivers a sublime performance, it makes that extra £300 outlay look good value, cramming more functionality into an already delightful package.

Another USP of the SPL is its 'Voltair' 120V amp technology, where a higher voltage is used to maintain dynamic range and avoid clipping in the amplification process. Such an approach needs to be implemented properly, so as not to introduce noise and distortion. Yet SPL has cracked this – the Phonitor X offers effortless amplification (rated at 2 x 1W into 600 ohms) with no discernible imperfection.

And how does it sound? Exemplary. It's natural, solid and bold when it needs to be, other times delicate and conveying the finest details. Subtle moments in the opening of *Dunkirk* (the flutter of leaflets, the sound of a tap and hose desperate for water) were effortlessly captured. A later gunshot caused an involuntary duck on my part.

## HCC VERDICT



### SPL Phonitor X

→ From £1,650 → [www.handinhand.uk.net](http://www.handinhand.uk.net)

## Final standings

**THIS QUARTET SHOWS** that, whatever your budget, a headphone setup can give an amazing performance – without annoying anyone else. You can make your own cinematic space at a fraction of a cost of a full AV install.

As a headphone amplifier, the SPL Phonitor X is the best I have ever heard. Previously, I've had the rare pleasure of experiencing Sennheiser's Orpheus headphones, at £30,000, and came away a tad disappointed. No such feeling with my HD650/Phonitor X pairing.

In fact, I can't recommend the Phonitor X enough. If you live anywhere where you are limited to how much noise you can make, and headphones are the way to go, this device will fill the role of a very desirable pair of speakers.

Of course, the SPL may well be out of your price range, which is where Arcam's rHead comes in. Yes, this gives you the option later to upgrade its power supply, but out of the box it gets a lot right – especially at the bargain price.

Oppo's HA-1 is much more advanced, layering on additional functionality and control. It has a wonderfully precise sonic

signature and exemplary detailing. Pair it with an Oppo UDP-205 and a TV, and you'd have a multi-talented, high-performance media system.

Lastly, the Heed CanAmp MkII has had its thunder stolen somewhat by the price-cut Arcam rHead, but still gives a good performance at a decent price ■





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## LONG-TERM TEST

# Velodyne DD18+

**TIME ON TEST:** 6.5 years **REVIEWER:** Richard Stevenson

**VELODYNE'S DIRECT DRIVE** Plus (DD+) series was launched in 2011 as the brand's premium subwoofer range. It is still available today in models with 10in, 12in and 15in drivers – plus the whopping 18in driver version discussed here. Prices reach from £3,500 to a rather eye-watering £5,700.

The range shares a 1,250W Class D amp, built-in Auto-EQ Plus system and Velodyne's high-gain servo control. This monitors cone excursion 16,000 times a second and adjusts input current accordingly. The aim is to reduce overthrust and keep even the 18in driver as tight as a drum.

### What's good about it?

I owned a pair of the original DD18 subs back in the day. Big, square boxes full of watts and drivers with magnets that could pull the moon. Subtle, they were not. The

subsequent Direct Drive Plus series promised more power, tighter cones and an improved EQ system with its own mic and PC software. It also featured much nicer cabinets. Two DD18s were traded in for a DD18+.

While few people will shop for a subwoofer on cosmetics, the DD18+ is rather fetching considering its sheer size – 53cm wide, 58cm tall and a whopping 65cm (plus connectors) deep. The dark-wood grain, high-gloss lacquer and curved sides are all premium furniture quality. Velodyne's heavy grille can sit flush all round, with the sub's blue display shining through its mesh. Pop the grille off and its carbon-weave 18in driver has that *Back to the Future* vibe. It's almost a shame that you can't see the driver's near 20kg magnet.

The DD18+ has tricks up its sleeve: simultaneous balanced, phono and speaker-level inputs; onscreen display via composite or S-Video; a remote control, onboard EQ; and six genre-based EQ presents named Theater (spelled incorrectly, obviously), Rock, Jazz, Custom, Games and EQ-defeat.

### AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
18in active  
subwoofer

**POSITION:**  
Still Velodyne's  
pack-leader

**PEERS:**  
SVS PB16-Ultra;  
REL No.25



A factory-calibrated heavyweight mic is supplied. Use this with the one-touch Auto-EQ Plus system that calibrates the sub's output in minutes. EQ'ing your way out of an acoustically poor but cosmetically acceptable subwoofer position is eminently possible. It's also a whole lot easier than dragging near 60kg of wood and metal around.

If you want to see what Auto-EQ Plus is doing, you can use the onscreen display, although this is painfully low-res and blocky. For fine-tuning, connect your laptop to the sub, boot up Velodyne's supplied software and dive into its mindbogglingly in-depth manual parametric EQ system. There are onscreen frequency response curves in real time so you can tweak filters and see the in-room results immediately.

**'While few people will shop for a woofer on cosmetics, the DD18+ is rather fetching considering its sheer size'**

Suitably EQ'd, the DD18+ delivers enormous, seismic bass. With the servo control set to its max level (8), LFE impacts are so tight they can knock the air out of your lungs. While big power amps and big drivers delivered big bass in the original DD18, the '+' model is in a different league in terms of control and attack.

Even now the DD18+ is still going strong. It gets moved and re-EQ'd with every major system shake-up (occupational hazard) and has been abused senseless on many occasions. And it still looks superb, especially when I get rid of the layer of dust on its acre-sized top panel.

## What's not so good about it?

The main issue with a huge American sub like the DD18+



## SPECIFICATIONS

**DRIVE UNITS:** 1 x 18in forward-firing carbon-weave driver **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 14Hz-120Hz (+/-3dB) **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 1,250W Class D amplifier **REMOTE CONTROL:** Yes **DIMENSIONS:** 580(h) x 530(w) x 650(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 60kg

**FEATURES:** Phono LFE input/output/thru; balanced XLR input/output/thru; speaker-level input; S-Video output and composite video output for onscreen display; Ethernet; RS-232; IR input; 12V trigger; Auto-EQ Plus; parametric EQ

is that UK movie fans rarely have huge American rooms. Positioning the DD18+ is back-breaking and getting it level is not aided by Velodyne using four adjustable feet on the thinnest screw threads imaginable. The only way I could stop the sub rocking on the flimsy threads was to screw the feet in tight and use packing spacers underneath. Not really ideal for a costly piece of hardware.

Moreover, unless you have a room the size of a small auditorium, you won't use a fraction of the DD18+'s power or potential. The sub's gain control runs from 00 to 99, but for the LFE output from most AVRs it needs setting at 05. Any more, and the DD18+ will be out of kilter with a receiver's auto-setup routine.

Having experimented with sub/sat stereo with the DD18+, I can safely say that it's not at its best until that gain control is the right side of level 15. It still generates a massive sound, but it doesn't get dynamic and electrifyingly exciting until its 1,250W amp wakes up. Auto-setup on an AVR sees the DD18+ running on tick-over.

This beggars the question why I then I acquired a second DD18+ later in 2011. Certainly, the look, specification and sheer LF scale of a pair of DD18+s is unsurpassed. For stereo playback at real live-music volume levels they are breathtaking in their slam and bass articulation. But for AV use the second sub really only makes the 'just ticking over' problem worse.

Used as a master and slave-linked pair, I have to set the gain to 03 or 04 just to keep at 85dB with AVR test tones. As such, the subs never really get the chance to come alive and achieve their very best with movies in my relatively compact room. Arguably, a DD15+ or even a DD12+ would have been a better bet.

And that EQ system is looking a bit old and clunky, too. Having recently tested Bowers & Wilkins' DBID, with its app-based setup, measurement and DSP EQ correction, faffing around with Velodyne's parametric filters, a laptop and a block-text onscreen display feels seriously old-school. Mind you, it still works well.

## Should I buy it?

If you have a big room, like to listen at cinema-realistic volumes and want LF as deep and as tight as it gets, there is no faulting the Velodyne DD18+ in performance terms. It is a bass beast wrapped in some of the finest clothes ever to grace a monster sub. But you almost certainly don't need two of them, and the user experience is not the slickest ■

**1. 10in, 12in and 15in iterations share the same 1,250W amp and EQ system**

**2. The busy back panel hints at the DD18+'s setup flexibility**

## HCC VERDICT



### Velodyne DD18+

→ £5,700 → [www.velodyneacoustics.com](http://www.velodyneacoustics.com)

**WE SAY:** One for the largest-scale home cinemas, the DD18+ revels in unleashing huge, tightly controlled bass at prodigious levels. Rom-com fans need not apply.

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# Digital Copy

**Mark Craven** wonders if home cinema will ever beat its addiction to cabling – or are advancements in AV technology pushing the wireless dream further away than ever?

**WHEN I READ** Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, I remember a throwaway line about scientists discovering that two cables left in a drawer will always become entangled. At least, I think I remember this – I read the book over twenty years ago. It may actually have been in a different book altogether. Or a false memory implanted before I rolled off the Tyrell Corp production line.

Anyway, I was reminded of this recently when I went hunting for the 6.35mm jack cable for my electric guitar (I am a big believer in the idea that, no matter how bad a player you are, a little distortion and a lot of volume can go a long way). Having looked in all the obvious places, I realised it might have ended up in what I like to call my Box of Doom.

The Box of Doom is where I put electrical wotsits that have no other particular place to go, and aren't likely to be used any time soon. You may well have a Box of Doom yourself. I actually have several. One is entirely devoted to USB sticks; another contains 3D glasses for screens I no longer own, wall-mount templates and all the other detritus that falls out of a TV's packaging if you give it a shake.

And then there's a box full of cables. Hauling this out of the cupboard and prising off the lid, I felt like an AV Indiana Jones, as I was certain there would be things in there from the last decade, possibly even the last century.

It was full to the brim. And, yes, all cables and wires were tangled together in a way that suggests these things really do have a life of their own.

## Purple reign

In the process of finding my guitar lead, I did a rudimentary stock check. I have, it transpires, over ten unwanted/unused HDMI cables, some with bendy heads, some with braiding so thick you could

use it to lasso a horse, one purple. Who wants an HDMI cable any other colour than black or white? If it's you, write in and tell me why.

As well as HDMI, I appear to be running some sort of museum for flimsy, unterminated speaker wire, of the type always bundled with all-in-one speaker packages circa 2004. I also have copious component cables, a phalanx of phono leads, a USB extender, various Scart adaptors and at least one cable that I have no clue what it's for.

What does all this mean? One: I need to do a run to the tip. Two: the world of wireless home cinema can't come soon enough.

I appreciate this is not a new battle cry, and that various companies and scientists have long been beavering away on solutions to cable clutter. I also appreciate that I wrote about wireless AV transmission in this very column two years ago. What's happened in the intervening period? Erm, not a lot.

Actually, that's a lie. Various wireless video vendors have been busy baking 4K playback support into their hardware, but it would seem that they simply can't keep up with the moving goalposts of modern technology. At this year's CES, IT accessories specialist IOGEAR debuted its snappily titled GW4KHDKIT60, a send/receive combi that caters to 4K/60Hz content. But no word was mentioned of HDR support.

The major brands need to step up to the plate here. The likes of Samsung and Sony are members of the WHDI and WirelessHD consortiums, and have been for years, but still can't engineer a wireless hookup between a BD deck and flatscreen telly. Maybe they're too busy playing electric guitar... ■

*Is your AV system neat and tidy, or a car-crash of cable clutter? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

Having finally located his guitar lead, **Mark Craven** couldn't remember where he'd put his guitar. Which was probably for the best





# Film Fanatic

After an encounter with the UK Blu-ray release of the *Flatliners* remake, **Anton van Beek** has decided it's finally time he had words with Sony Pictures about Blu-ray audio...

**I'D LIKE TO** think that copies of *HCC* sometimes make it into the UK offices of Blu-ray distributors. As such, it's conceivable that my column may occasionally catch the eye of a company bigwig. With this in mind, I'd like to directly address anybody reading this who works for Sony Pictures Home Entertainment...

Hi. It's time we had a conversation about object-based audio.

Look, I get it. You needed a way to sell the new Ultra HD Blu-ray format and decided to use 3D audio as an exclusive feature on the discs, providing another bullet-point on the packaging to lure in punters.

It may not be fair to home cinema enthusiasts who have so far been unable to invest in a 4K display or UHD Blu-ray player (because they blew all of their cash replacing their AVR and adding height speakers to make their setups compatible with Dolby Atmos and DTS:X soundtracks), **but that's the price you pay for being an early adopter.** And you certainly weren't alone, with Twentieth Century Fox and Walt Disney doing exactly the same thing.

I might not like it, but I understand the decision-making behind it. And on occasion, a situation like *Blade Runner 2049* arrives, where UK Blu-ray buyers can ignore your local DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 release and import the Warner Bros. all-region Blu-ray from the US instead, which does come flaunting a Dolby Atmos soundmix.

If 4K disc promotion is the reasoning here – fine. But let's not pretend otherwise. I've heard rumours of some customers being told that disc space is the issue behind a lack of Atmos mixes on Blu-rays. Which seems odd, as Paramount, Universal Pictures, Warner Bros. and Lionsgate have repeatedly shown just how possible it really is.

## Fangs for nothing

And you couldn't just leave it there, could you? Not content with simply repeating the Atmos-free platters put out by your US division, you also felt the need to mess with the handful of the Blu-rays that it did issue with 3D audio. Both *Goosebumps* and the reissue of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* were downgraded from Dolby Atmos mixes on their Sony Pictures US releases to DTS-HD MA 5.1 over here, while *Pixels* underwent a switch from Dolby Atmos to Auro-3D.

There's more! With this month's UK Blu-ray release of the *Flatliners* remake (pictured, see p103), you've gone further. Rather than bundling the DTS-HD MA 5.1 track that appeared on the Sony Pictures US release, you've given UK consumers an Auro-3D mix instead.

The decision to stick such a soundtrack on *Pixels* back in 2015 could at least be defended on the principle that it was still too early to know any better. But in 2018 Auro-3D is at best an after-thought, having failed to gain any traction with consumers thanks largely to the general incompatibility of its speaker setup requirements with the more mainstream Dolby Atmos, and a lack of compatible hardware. Opting to include an Auro-3D track on the new *Flatliners* Blu-ray is the equivalent of telling UK consumers: 'Okay, so you want object-based 3D soundtracks, well here you go...'

So let's just agree that you'll stop right now. Stop suggesting that only 4K discs are capable of carrying object-based 3D audio. Stop stripping back Atmos mixes from discs your US arm has already released containing them. And stop trolling us with completely pointless Auro-3D tracks ■

*Are you annoyed by the lack of Atmos audio on Blu-rays? Let us know: email [letters@homecinemachoice.com](mailto:letters@homecinemachoice.com)*

Having got all of that off his chest, **Anton van Beek** is going to calm down by listening to his official Dolby Atmos demo disc on a continual loop





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”

Mark Craven HCC March 2017





# In The Mix

As AV enthusiasts get savvier and the world of HDR gets more confusing, **Jon Thompson** discovers that the very concept of 'black' is under attack

**A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE** is a dangerous thing, to misquote Alexander Pope. If he was alive now, he might use the example of online chat around HDR as a case in point. HDR is a hot topic in AV circles, and as it gets hotter, more misinformation seems to be spread by uninformed self-appointed know-it-alls.

What I find odd are those who seem to think they know more than the people who make the films in the first place. For some reason, the black level of an HDR10 image seems to be a burning topic online, mainly due to someone adding 2 and 2 and making 77. To the point that one guy has reverse-engineered a whole load of HDR10 discs. Although at least he was trying to inject some science into proceedings.

I'll start at the start. The black level code value for 10-bit video is code value 64, as it has been since the defining of 10-bit video in the 1990s. In 8-bit video, black is code value 16, and that has never changed either. HDR10 is, as the name implies, high dynamic range in 10-bits. So far, so good.

Now we come to the bit that seems to have caused a headache – what is black? Well, black is only black when compared to something brighter. True black or absolute black is an elusive target. OLED displays can achieve this as they switch off pixels to give a 0 nit measurement. The issue with OLED is the step from absolute black to the first value above black – it's a massive perceptual jump. LCD displays can't achieve 0 nits. They are, at best, about 0.005 nits. The advantage is that one code value above black doesn't look like such a huge jump.

When mastering, you can define your reference black level in the metadata, and it's mostly defined as either 0.005 nits if it's mastered on a Dolby Pulsar monitor, and 0 nits if it's mastered on a Sony BVM-X300 OLED monitor. Yet the code value sent to both monitors for black is still code value 64.

Some people have assumed and calculated that a disc, if mastered at 0.005 nits, actually has a code value of 77 for black. This would lift up the black level and reduce the dynamic range of your display. I have had about a dozen people in the last six months contact me about the correct black level for HDR10.

## 'Birthday greetings, bottle of wine...'

Then I found online the chap reverse-engineering UHD Blu-rays to measure the black level. He did this by capturing the images back into a grading system (and could have saved a huge amount of time and effort if he'd used the pixel picker on an AccuPel DGA-6000 Analyzer, which would have told him the same information). What he discovered is that in a few titles the blacks are not code value 64...

One title mentioned online is *Lucy*. I have checked the disc, and black is indeed code value 64. Yet in some scenes it has some bad comping for visual FX, and the blacks are indeed lifted. This is a production issue – no need to change your TV's black level for a few badly done shots. Just watch the movie instead.

Other instances where black might not be code value 64 could be due to a wrongly calibrated grading system (a sackable offence!), or the director, DoP or grader deciding to lift black for an aesthetic reason. This is where a little knowledge is dangerous. You have no idea what decisions were made in the grade (or why), other than this is how the creative team wanted the image perceived.

The moral of this tale is: don't listen to someone telling you your system should be set up their way, when all the test patterns and display calibration devices are setting black correctly to code value 64. Life is too short, and there are films to watch! ■

*What's the least satisfying 4K HDR disc you've seen?  
Let us know: email [letters@homecinemachoice.com](mailto:letters@homecinemachoice.com)*

When he's not in his screening room, **Jon Thompson** tweets about Hollywood gossip, movie-making and digital mastering at [@johnnyfocal](https://twitter.com/johnnyfocal)





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# Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current tech? Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **Team HCC** is here to help

## Not a Bright idea

**It's kind of weird when a movie like *Bright*, with a budget of \$90m and with big stars, is skipping cinema [AV Avenger, HCC #282].**

All that hard work on CG, make-up, sound design, etc, should really be shown on the biggest screen possible.

For me it's no different than the straight-to-DVD concept. It's not like I'm totally against streaming or Netflix – it's a great platform to watch TV series, especially on the go. But blockbuster movies going straight to streaming is simply wrong. It's enough already that streaming is affecting and ruining physical media overall. Maybe I'm being too pessimistic, but I wouldn't want a future with no cinema!

*Romaulds Pizans*

**Mark Craven replies:** Could that be where we are headed? A future with no cinema whatsoever? That's a terrifying prospect, and I'd hope that with film studios still earning billions of dollars from blockbuster titles that we won't see it becoming a reality.

That said, the case of *Bright* (and *Annihilation* and *The Cloverfield Paradox* – see p12) suggest that cinemas and film studios have a fight on their hands in the 21st century



Netflix original *Bright* cost \$90m to make

to lure people to the multiplex. And as home cinema fans, no matter how much we like to moan about popcorn and ticket pricing, we need a thriving theatrical cinema industry to feed our domestic one.

Where it would seem that Netflix and other streaming platforms can fill a void is with the

so-called 'mid-budget' movies that have fallen out of fashion with studios that either seek a guaranteed mega-hit, or a micro-budget surprise. Those who find the Summer schedules unappealing due to the surplus of FX-filled franchise sequels – who cry out for something along the lines of *Lethal*

## Learn your Western history!

With regards to Westerns [Collecting... HCC #281], oh my... you have missed the big one – *The Big Country*, while later films *The Salvation* [2014] and *Seraphim Falls* [2007] are better than the overrated *The Hateful Eight* or *Django Unchained*. And don't get me started on *The Revenant*. Alec

**Anton van Beek replies:** *The Big Country*, starring Gregory Peck and directed by William 'Ben-Hur' Wyler, was one of a number of 1950s (and Technicolor) Westerns up for consideration, but we plumped for *Shane* and *The Searchers*!

As for the other two Westerns you mentioned: you're right, *The Salvation* is better than those Tarantino films. I've not seen *Seraphim Falls*, starring Liam Neeson and Pierce Brosnan, but have added it to my to-watch list and will try to track down a copy of the 2008 Blu-ray.



Gregory Peck surveys *The Big Country*...



*Weapon or Die Hard* – may discover that other distribution platforms eventually pick up the slack.

## Universal harmony

I might be a bit late to this, but I've only just read the October issue [HCC #277] and I found the opinion page about universal remotes rather odd.

Surely a system of multiple remotes is more complicated and harder for guests? I got a Logitech Harmony remote. Spent about an hour setting up activities for all our stuff and now family, babysitters, etc, can easily use everything just by pressing an action. My daughter is four now, but she's been able to use it since she was about three. I've no idea why people wouldn't use a universal remote these days!

Tim

**Mark Craven replies:** My experience the last time I used a universal remote (admittedly a mid-priced one) was that it worked fine, but only up to a point – it was of little use when system settings on an AV receiver needed adjusting. For those who have no need to fiddle around in endless menus, or who might be fazed by the complexity of a three/four/five remote operating procedure (such as your daughter), they'll make perfect sense. Maybe I should give one another go...

## Give me 7.1 audio!

**Why the hell is Christopher Nolan ripping off the public?**

*The Dark Knight Trilogy* on Blu-ray has been around for quite a while now, but he said he spent so much time overseeing the process of getting the movies put on to Ultra HD BD... Well, a nine-disc set it may be, but with all the effort put in why is *The Dark Knight* (Disc 2) still Dolby Digital 5.1? We are not talking about a DVD here. Does he not know a great movie is about sound and picture – and that sound should be 7.1 on all Ultra HD discs!

*Dunkirk*? What a waste of money buying the UHD release when the Blu-ray would be fine as, again, no 7.1 audio.

We might as well sell our projectors and our 75in TVs, our AV receivers, our seven speakers and our 4K players because the big companies are not putting titles out in 7.1.

Mike Skaskiw

**Mark Craven replies:** You've confused me slightly as the 1080p Blu-ray version of *The Dark Knight* in Warner's recent UHD boxset features a Dolby TrueHD 5.1 mix, as the film has always had on BD, not a Dolby Digital 5.1 mix. So it's not really comparable to a DVD release.

As for your wider point, Mike, I assume you were hoping for a new, bigger soundmix, but

## ★ Star Letter...

### A short question about short reviews

Why are most of your long reviews about horror or sci-fi films? I would like to have had more information about *Atomic Blonde* and *The Hitman's Bodyguard*.  
Brian Small

**Anton van Beek replies:** In hindsight, we would have given *The Hitman's Bodyguard* Blu-ray more space when we reviewed it in HCC #281 if we'd known we were going to enjoy it as much as we did, but all there was to go on were the (predominantly negative) cinema reviews and the fact that it starred Samuel L. Jackson, not always a sign of a quality movie. Generally, our Playback reviews section is planned in advance of discs arriving. Don't let our small review put you off – it's definitely worth watching if you like buddy action comedies.

*Atomic Blonde* received a longer review in HCC #280 on Blu-ray – the small review two issues later was simply a brief look at the UHD release.

In recent issues we've given over space to BD releases for *Carrie*, *The Thing* and *Suspiria*, all sci-fi/horror titles. When it comes to back-catalogue content, such genres make up a good chunk of the output of independent labels. And it's these labels that are really pushing the boat out to give film collectors the deluxe packages they

demand.

Sometimes we'll give more space to films we think may get unfairly ignored, such as *Shin Godzilla* in HCC #282. And we have to guess the titles that HCC readers are most interested in when planning our software reviews, which isn't easy.

For instance, this issue we've decided to spend more time with a BD of George Romero's zombie classic *Night of The Living Dead* – despite this being a film now 50 years old and already available previously on BD – while allocating less space to the new *Flatliners* movie. Again, this was a decision made in advance, but the latter film turned out to be as mind-numbingly average as we suspected. It does have an Auro-3D mix, though.

Hopefully this answers your question, Brian, and thanks for the input.

Star letter-writer Brian grabs the latest star-studded adaptation of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* on Blu-ray courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment. Boasting a killer cast including Kenneth Branagh (who also directs), Johnny Depp, Michelle Pfeiffer, Penélope Cruz and Judi Dench, *Murder on the Orient Express* arrives on Digital Download on February 26, followed by 4K Ultra HD, Blu-ray and DVD on March 5.



## Battle of subtitles

Just a quick question that I hope Anton van Beek may be able to answer for me. I was watching the *Battle of Britain* Blu-ray (UK Region B, 2009 edition) and when it gets to the part where Christopher Plummer and Susannah York have a romantic rendezvous at an English pub I was surprised to see the name of the pub subtitled below. >

this doesn't seem to be Christopher Nolan's style. As you say, even his most recent movie (*Dunkirk*) sports a 5.1 soundtrack. Obviously, for those with 7.1, 9.1, 7.2.4, etc, speaker systems this is a little annoying, but you can always experiment with an AVR's upmixing processing to make use of those extra channels. It also means that those with 5.1 setups don't feel like they're missing out.

So much so, I went back and re-checked all my subtitle settings on player and disc, which all appeared as usual.

This occurred again, when Christopher Plummer leaves the pub car park with a sign on the wall, perfectly legible in English. I then proceeded to watch the rest of the movie and all the German dialogue was correctly subtitled in English below, but there were several instances of superfluous subtitling for perfectly legible English signs in the background.

Does Anton know what was happening here, and whether it was a hardware/software setting or something on the actual film itself? I don't remember any unnecessary subtitling before, but it was a long time since I watched the movie last, so I may have forgotten.

As for the disc, I wouldn't call it the greatest-quality transfer ever, but if you have only ever watched the film on TV or DVD before it was certainly an improvement over those mediums.

Simon

**Anton van Beek replies:** As I don't have a copy of the *Battle of Britain* Blu-ray to check, my only thought is that this will be the result of an over-enthusiastic subtitler. I can't see any reason for providing subtitles (in English) for a sign that is written in English, and it can't stem from any other subtitle language track as it would only be of use if it was translated into that language.

The (unlikely) alternative is that your copy has some sort of weird encoding fault. Perhaps other HCC readers who own that disc could check...

## Cinema needs to immerse you

Mark Craven asked if home cinema has to be 5.1 sound or if a soundbar or soundbase speaker can do the job [*Digital Copy, HCC #282*] and for me I have to say that 5.1 is the minimum.

In my home cinema I have a 5.1 system (it's a living room so no space really to go any bigger) and Blu-rays sound great, with that immersion you only really get from surround sound. A friend of mine has a soundbar with a subwoofer and when I am around there for sports events, etc, the sound is fine. It's clear and has good bass. But for a movie it just doesn't create the same experience as a 5.1 setup. And these days it isn't only Blu-ray and DVD that offer 5.1 mixes. Sky and Netflix and even the BBC broadcast in 5.1.

Of course I understand why soundbars are popular but if you really want to get the full home cinema experience you need to have a surround sound system!

Colin

**Mark Craven replies:** Thanks, Colin. You're definitely right about 'immersion' and surround sound. Actually, this is one area where I think home cinema can outperform a commercial cinema – my general impression of multiplex surround systems these days is of a gigantic wall of LCR sound, and massive bass, but scant wraparound audio. Perhaps I need to get there earlier to bag a seat in the sweet spot?

Soundbars are a fine addition to the consumer audio market, plugging a gap created by thinscreen displays. And the likes of Yamaha's premium YSP-5600SW come sufficiently close to a genuine home cinema experience to justify their existence. Far fewer wires, too.

## Gone, but not forgotten

I just found a new home for our old Panasonic plasma (I've sent a pic of the original HCC



In 2004, a 50in Panasonic plasma set you back £5,600...

review from 2004). It brought a tear to my eye; not because of its sterling service over the years but the realisation of what £5,600 can buy you today. I can't help but wonder if the rate of improvement will make today's high-end TVs similarly obsolete in 14 years.

lon

**Mark Craven replies:** £5,600 for a 50in TV with no onboard speakers and a pixel resolution of 1,366 x 768 looks a bit... topky in this day and age. In fact, I'm frequently surprised by the price erosion of consumer AV, particularly screens and disc players (and at our ability to still think such screens and discs are too expensive).

The current crop of high-end TVs will probably look terribly old-fashioned in 14 years' time. But they may still be fit for purpose, in the same way that occasionally I fire up my 16-year-old Xbox for some low-spec gaming.

You don't say whether the 'new home' for the Panasonic TH-50PHW6 plasma is someone else's living room, or the local tip. I'm hoping it's the former, because I'm a softie at heart ■

## Contact us...

Write to HCC, AV Tech Media Ltd, Suite 25, Eden House, Enterprise Way, Edenbridge, Kent, TN8 6HF, or email us at [letters@homecinemachoice.com](mailto:letters@homecinemachoice.com). Please note: we cannot guarantee to print/answer all the letters we receive. Sorry.

Yamaha's YSP-5600SW system: cinematic soundbar thrills





## WIN! Great Blu-rays up for grabs...

Just email your answer to [Competitions@homecinemachoice.com](mailto:Competitions@homecinemachoice.com) to be in with a chance to win

### Paddington 2

The smash-hit family film is available to own on Digital Download from March 5 and DVD, Blu-ray and Ultra HD Blu-ray from March 12, courtesy of Studiocanal. To celebrate the release we're giving five lucky readers the chance to win a Limited Edition *Paddington 2* Blu-ray Steelbook and a bundle of extra goodies including a travel card holder, a sticker set, a tote bag, a keyring, an activity set and a pin badge!

#### Question:

Which writer created Paddington Bear?

#### Answer:

- A) Roald Dahl B) Michael Bond  
C) Julia Donaldson

Email your answer with 'Paddington 2' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!



### The Death of Stalin

Get ready for a true-life comedy of terrors courtesy of Armando Iannucci's new political satire. *The Death of*

*Stalin* is available to own on Blu-ray and DVD from February 26, and thanks to Entertainment One we've five copies of the Blu-ray up for grabs!

#### Question:

Armando Iannucci co-created which tragicomic TV personality?

#### Answer:

- A) Alan Partridge B) Ron Burgundy  
C) Kent Brockman

Email your answer with 'Death of Stalin' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!



### Jigsaw

The game continues on February 26 when *Jigsaw*, the latest instalment in one of the highest grossing horror franchises of all time, makes its debut on DVD,

Blu-ray and 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray.

To celebrate the release, we've teamed up with Lionsgate UK and have five copies of the *Jigsaw* 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray to give away!

#### Question:

Which horror icon plays John Kramer (aka The Jigsaw Killer) in all eight *Saw* movies?

#### Answer:

- A) Robert Englund B) Christopher Lee  
C) Tobin Bell

Email your answer with 'Jigsaw' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!



### Attack on Titan: Season 2

The battle for humanity's survival continues as the long-awaited second season of the anime smash *Attack on Titan* hits Blu-ray

and DVD on February 26, courtesy of Sony Pictures Home Entertainment and Funimation Entertainment. To mark the release we've got five Blu-rays to be won!

#### Question:

Which planet has a number of moons named after the Titans of Greek mythology?

#### Answer:

- A) Jupiter B) Saturn  
C) Neptune

Email your answer with 'Attack on Titan' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!

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# Certified: AV-Holic!

HCC reader **Ken** has fitted both a drop-down PJ screen and a 4K TV into his living room system, bolstered by Dolby Atmos audio. Now it's time to take Friday afternoon off work...

## Welcome to the AV-Holics Hall of Fame – introduce yourself!

Hi. My name is Ken Britton, I'm 55 and I'm currently employed as a Senior Porter at a local auctioneers.

## How long have you been into home cinema?

I caught the AV bug when I saw a domestic, CRT front-projection system for the first time. It was probably no better than a 60in, 4:3-ratio, standard-definition image, but to a teenage boy in the 1970s it might as well have been IMAX!

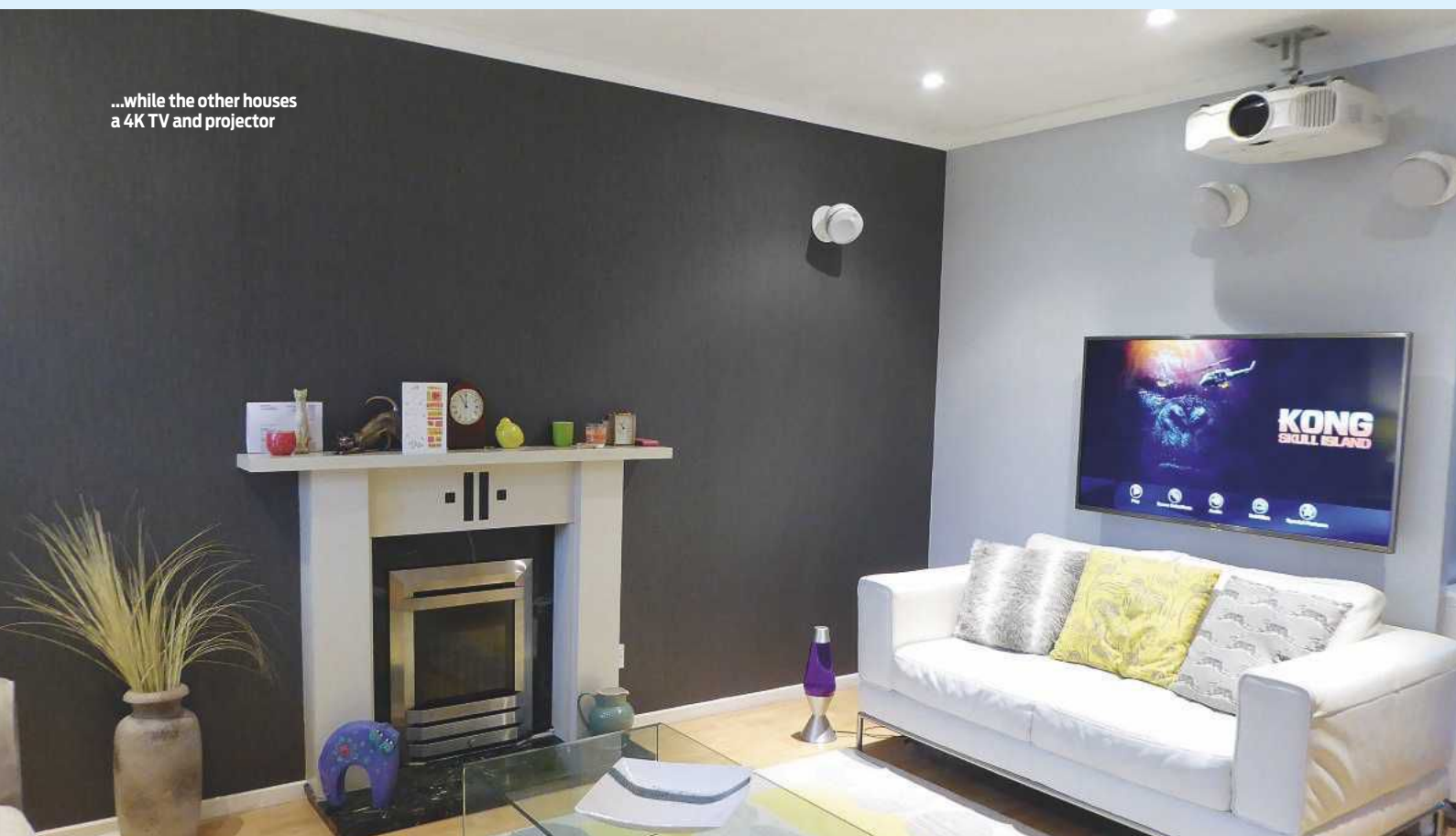
I had been running a VCR/CRT TV/stereo setup since around 1988, but when DVDs started catching on in a big way in the late 1990s (and our only local cinema was turned into an LA Fitness), I took the plunge and bought a rear-projection TV and 5.1 AVR and speakers.

It was in 2003, however, when my wife mentioned that I could fit a projection screen where our existing blackout blind was (at least that's what I heard, anyway) that things got serious and I bought my first projector.





...while the other houses  
a 4K TV and projector



## What's in your AV setup now?

I have a Denon AVR-X4200 and Focal Dome 7.1 speaker array, plus a Denon PMA-520AE stereo amplifier and Bose 191 in-ceiling speakers (which were back surrounds in an earlier system incarnation) for Dolby Atmos/DTS:X duties. I also have a Sony Blu-ray player and Humax YouView PVR. I use an Epson EH-TW7200 projector for movies and a 49in LG 4K TV for all the rest.

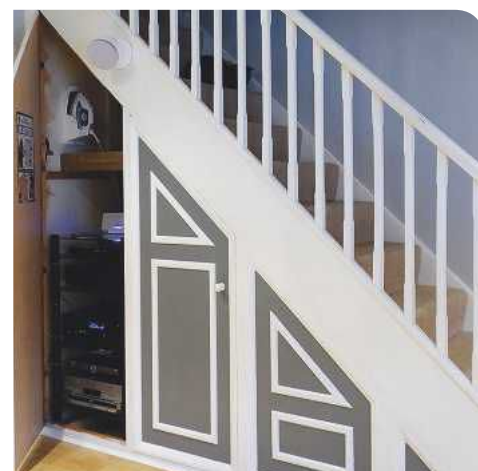
The AV rack resides in the storage cupboard under the stairs where I also keep a small selection of 'Now Showing' Blu-rays and DVDs. These get swapped out regularly with the 450-plus discs on shelves in another room.

All of this has been squeezed into an open-plan room that is a normal lounge for 95 per cent of the time. This has dictated much of the system design. >

A pair of Bose in-ceiling speakers handle height FX



To get the cinema looking neat and tidy, speaker wires and AV cabling were run in-wall. Then it was time for a sleek grey and white colour scheme



### What was the last thing you added to your setup?

The Denon AVR/stereo amp combo. I couldn't resist the lure of the new object-based codecs.

### Are you thinking of upgrading anything else?

Yes, the whole house! We might be in a position to move abroad in a couple of years; hopefully, the new gaff will have the space for a cinema room, where the only limitations will be my imagination and budget. More immediate plans are simply to finish tidying inside the AV cupboard.

### What's your favourite bit of kit and why?

It has to be the Denon AVR. I felt I needed 3D audio in my life but had only recently upgraded to the Focals, including all new (in-wall) cable runs and the hours of decorating involved, so I wasn't keen to start ripping things up to reconfigure for a 5.1.2 setup. I just wanted to keep what I had and add a couple of overhead speakers. The AVR-X4200 offered the nine channels of processing I was after at a decent price.



The Focal subwoofer blends in well

What I hadn't expected was the tangible jump in sound quality over my outgoing AVR. Well, that and the soundproofing I fitted to the (woefully feeble) party wall a few years back. It really has helped to reduce propagation. I hadn't received any complaints before, but it occurred to me that if I could detect slightly raised conversation from next door it was fair to say they would have been quite aware of a full-scale Chitauri attack in my sitting room...

### What movies/discs do you use to show off your system?

At the moment my choice discs are *Pacific Rim*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *Star Trek Into Darkness*, *Edge of Tomorrow* (all in 3D) and *Dunkirk*, for its humble, but magnificent, 5.1 DTS-HD mix.

### And what are your Top 5 favourite flicks?

That's tough to answer. I love the classics like *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Lawrence of Arabia*... but a current list, and films I can stand viewing repeatedly, would include *Baby Driver* (new entry!), *12 Monkeys*, *Django Unchained*, any of the *Bourne*... trilogy, and *Fight Club*.

### Do you stream movies/TV from Netflix/Amazon/Sky, etc?

Yes – free-to-view films and boxsets. I haven't actually rented since the days of Blockbuster.

### How often do you settle down for movie night?

As the missus doesn't share my passion for films, movie night in our house is a – once every couple of months – rarity. But I am an AV-Holic after all, so when renegotiating my contract of employment a while ago I agreed to work longer hours Monday to Thursday in exchange for an early finish on Friday. This means a weekly afternoon matinee and sometimes a double-bill. In some ways this is a blessing as there is never any debate about what to watch. This daytime viewing, in a modern, open-plan space, necessitates all manner of curtains and blinds to bring on the darkness!



### What do friends and family think of the cinema room?

Those that do get to experience it seem genuinely impressed. Mind you, just the presence of a PJ hanging from the ceiling and seven satellite speakers adorning the walls is enough to make many people (especially married blokes) quite envious. My wife will occasionally sit for a film with me – she does enjoy all the latest Marvel releases, something to do with the inclusion of Chris Hemsworth no doubt, and quite a few actioners. Infuriatingly she does not share my passion for 3D. Her loss, I say! ■

## Share your cinema system in the mag!

If you want to be in **HCC**, you'll need to send us some hi-res images of your cinema room. Here are a few tips...

1. Go big. Set your camera to take images at the largest possible size, and at the highest resolution. Don't worry about cropping or resizing – we will make them print-ready.
2. Get in focus. Make sure your photos are as sharp and clear as possible. If you have one, use a tripod, or place your camera on a flat, steady surface and take pictures on a delay. The sharper they are, the bigger we can print them.
3. Let some light in. While we tend to watch

- movies in the dark, our cinema systems look their best when they are lit. If you can shoot with natural daylight, do so. If your room doesn't get a lot of light (a garage conversion, for instance) then switch on whatever lights are fitted. Avoid using flash wherever possible.
4. Be thorough. Send photos of as much of the room as possible. Images of both the front and back of the room, the kit rack, speakers, seating, disc shelf, movie poster art... The more the merrier.

5. Don't be shy. Send a picture of yourself!
6. Show us more. Got pictures of your room before it was a cinema? Or snaps of work being done? We love to see these, too.

#### Now what?

Email your images to **letters@homecinemachoice.com** with the subject heading 'AV-Holic', and provide your answers to the questions above – then we'll be in touch!



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# Certified: AV-Holic!

An attic conversion has given *HCC* reader **Mirek** the space needed for his Sony projector/7.1 speaker setup. And now he's already thinking of a 4K upgrade



Before this room was complete, Mirek felt his AV gear was being wasted



## Welcome to the AV-Holics Hall of Fame!

My name is Mirek, I've lived in Dublin since 2005, but am originally from Poland.

## How long have you been into home cinema?

I've had a keen interest in home cinema for

over a decade, since my Mum bought me my first Panasonic all-in-one system. Ever since then I have been upgrading!

Recently I purchased my first home and my other half (Ania) and I decided to do an attic conversion to incorporate a cinema room.

## What kit's in your setup?

The room's AV electronics are perhaps not as high-end as I would like. A Pioneer VSX-922

AV receiver routes audio to the speaker array, which at the moment is 7.1 – a combination of Polk Audio RC60i in-ceiling speakers, Sonus faber Toy Towers, Polk Audio RC65is across the front soundstage, and a REL S5 subwoofer.

The bigscreen visuals are provided by a Sony VPL-HW55ES projector, which fires on to a 100in Magic Screen Future Black AMLED. Content is delivered by a Panasonic DMP-



A local building firm answered the call to help convert the loft space to a home cinema room, and to ensure it was well soundproofed



As the work progresses, stud walls and wiring are in place, and the sizable front wall – to accommodate a 100in screen – is taking shape



Mirek's Sony VPL-HW55ES projector would eventually be installed in this dedicated enclosure. He rates the PJ a 'huge upgrade' over a previous Epson model



BDT370 Blu-ray player and 4TB Med8er server, which streams from my media library. Apart from the PJ, all equipment is located in an AV cabinet.

## Did you handle the room conversion yourself?

I had, over time, built up most of the equipment prior to buying this house in 2016, but never had anywhere to set things up properly, so it all got lumped into a combined lounge/dining/kitchen area – a huge waste given what I had invested in it.

After moving in, my fiancée and I decided to make our dream come true and build a home cinema. I had to involve builders as far as building regulations were concerned. I obtained a few quotes from different companies in Dublin; it was difficult to find good firms with soundproofing experience.

Finally, I found Stefan from NewSpace and he was brave enough to take on the challenge to convert our attic. The floor is soundproofed and the wall connecting with our neighbour has seven layers of acoustic treatments.

All cables are run behind the walls, the window is controlled by a Velux Integra remote controller, and all lights are controlled via iPad or iPhone. The conversion took almost three months but I am very happy with the final results.

## What was the last thing you added to the setup?

The Magic Screen replaced an Adeo Screen Reference. We waited a long time for that addition, but it's made a huge improvement in contrast.

## Are you thinking of upgrading anything soon?

We are planning to buy a new AVR, the Marantz SR7012, as it supports 7.1.2 setups, which, at the moment, my Pioneer can't do. I also want to hire an acoustics specialist to do a measurement of the room and build diffusors, bass traps, etc.

Next year it will be more exciting as we are planning on a true 4K experience with a new Sony projector.

## What's your favourite bit of kit?

This is very easy – the Sony HW55ES. It's fantastic! The sharpness and colours really blew me away. It's quite a huge upgrade from my previous Epson EH-TW5900. The motion handling and 3D playback make watching the bigscreen a real pleasure. It was worth every cent that I paid for it.

## What movies/discs do you use to show off the setup?

Something like *Dunkirk* by Christopher Nolan with its impeccable picture and sound, and *The Dark Knight* for the black levels.



Comfy seating for two – and room for Wonder Woman...



An in-wall cupboard houses system hardware

From a 3D point of view, *Avatar* is still one of the best.

## And what are your Top 5 favourite flicks?

I love watching the movies I grew up with like *Alien*, *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, *Blade Runner* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

## Do you stream movies/TV from Netflix/Amazon/Sky, etc?

No, not really. We don't currently have Netflix or Amazon as we do not own a TV!

We only watch movies in our home theatre. I typically buy Blu-rays and then transfer them to my media library. I prefer the reproduction from disc as opposed to streaming – picture and sound are far superior. You can't compare a Blu-ray disc with 50GB of data to the digital version on Netflix.



## Does the setup get a lot of use?

We use the room most evenings to watch movies. We love to spend time in our venue!

## What do family and friends think of the cinema?

All visitors have been greatly impressed with the finished product. One of my friends said that if he had the same setup at home he would never leave.

I have had nothing but positive compliments, which is pleasing because it took a long time to plan and execute. When they see the room for the first time, my family and friends are speechless.

They said I should charge an entry fee, and probably think I'm a bit mad to spend that much time and money on it, but they love to come over and watch Blu-ray movies all the same! ■



# SERIE T/i



T/7i (left) shows proprietary Arrow™ zero compression wireless connector upper corner.  
T/9i (right) features new Fiberallay™ ultra-fast driver.

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# PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **PADDINGTON 2** Unmissable or unbearable? **KINGSMAN: THE GOLDEN CIRCLE** Ultra-violent spy action heads to America **BLUE PLANET II** Dive into a world of 4K wonders **NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD** Iconic horror gets the Criterion Collection treatment **WOLF WARRIOR II** Chinese blockbuster explodes on Blu-ray & MORE!

## Full steam ahead!

Murder on the Orient Express → Twentieth Century Fox → All-region BD



Our team of AV detectives have been hard at work investigating the Blu-ray release of the latest bigscreen adaptation of Agatha Christie's best-known whodunnit. Head to p95 to find out if you should pick up a copy for your collection...

### HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed

Taron didn't want anyone to know he'd forgotten how to drive his car



# Madcap sequel goes soft

Matthew Vaughn's dapper spies don't scrub up as well as you might hope on this 4K outing

## → KINGSMAN: THE GOLDEN CIRCLE

While ...*The Golden Circle* is ultimately too self-indulgent to match the anarchic fun of the first *Kingsman* outing, it's not quite the outright shocker some have labelled it. The action scenes are still fantastically over the top, and the whole *Kingsman* spy vibe still feels cool despite being watered down by an irritating new American 'wing'.

It's just a shame that Julianne Moore's baddie schtick really doesn't work (nor do her character's actions make much sense), and that nobody dared tell director Matthew Vaughn when to stop.

**Picture:** This 4K Blu-ray's 2.40:1 presentation is a bizarre mix of very good and distractingly bad.

The bad comes from some excessive blurring in the image's corners and edges.

It varies in intensity, but at times – such as during the wedding sequence – it's so extreme it becomes almost all you see. It's presumably a side effect of the anamorphic lenses used to capture the action, so you might argue this blurring is authentic.

Here's the thing, though. The film was predominantly shot at 2.8K, and only given a 2K Digital Intermediate for cinema distribution. At those essentially HD resolutions,



the blurring is much less distracting, as proven by the HD Blu-ray packaged with the 4K disc. The 4K format exposes the blurring so much that it's something the production team should have considered when making the film.

On the upside, ...*The Golden Circle*'s use of HDR is forceful without being unnatural, and joins with the 4K Blu-ray's wider colour gamut to deliver some explosive visual moments. And the image is also capable of looking surprisingly crisp for a 2K upscale.

**Audio:** ...*The Golden Circle* arrives on 4K BD with a Dolby Atmos mix that lacks subtlety and nuance at times, particularly when it comes to tracking the frenetic punches and kicks during the film's up-close-and-personal fight sequences. It makes up for this, though, with an almost childish – and thus entirely appropriate – enthusiasm for cranking everything up to 11. Bass levels are at times truly extreme, and no opportunity to be loud and aggressive is wasted.

**Extras:** A nearly two-hour *Making of...* documentary found on the 1080p Blu-ray provides the main extra feature meat. It goes on a bit – much like the film it supports – and is a little staid in its structure, but there's some interesting behind-the-scenes footage, and some intriguing insight into Matthew Vaughn's undoubtedly hugely creative mind.

Aside from this there's just a 12-minute look at the film's opening taxi fight/chase sequence; trailers; and small galleries of production design and costume artwork.

## HCC VERDICT

### *Kingsman: The Golden Circle*

→ Twentieth Century Fox  
→ UHD Blu-ray & Region B BD → £35

**WE SAY:** An inferior but sometimes fun sequel let down in 4K guise by some distracting softness.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★





## Brimstone

Thunderbird Releasing  
All-region BD → £12



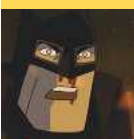
A mute frontier woman (Dakota Fanning) is pursued by a sinister preacher (Guy Pearce) in writer-director Martin

Koolhoven's enjoyably lurid, if over-long (149 minutes!) Western exploitation flick. No matter how grotesque and trashy the film's story may be, Koolhoven brings an artistic flair to the visuals that is well-served by this Blu-ray's sharply defined 2.40:1 Full HD encode. The DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack isn't quite as impactful as the visuals, but helps bring another layer of doom-laden atmosphere to proceedings. Extras consist of 83 minutes of cast and crew interviews, plus 13 deleted scenes.



## Batman: Gotham by Gaslight

Warner Bros. → All-region BD  
£17



Inspired by a hugely influential 1989 comic of the same name, this 15-rated animated adventure relocates

Batman to the 19th Century and pits him against Jack the Ripper. The result is one of DC's best animated features to date and we'd love to think that we might be in for more adventures using the setting. The Blu-ray itself serves up cleanly rendered 1080p visuals and lively DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio. Fun extras include a commentary, a look back at the impact of the *Gotham by Gaslight* comic, plus two archival Batman TV 'toons.



## The Death of Stalin

Entertainment One → Region B BD  
£25



With *The Thick of It*, *In the Loop* and *Veep* already under his belt, Armando Iannucci is a past master of political satire – so it comes as no real surprise that his account of the political

scheming that followed the death of Stalin in 1953 should prove to be a darkly hilarious masterpiece. What is more of a surprise, as you'll learn from this Blu-ray's chat-track (the best of the disc's modest array of extras), is just how often the film pulls back from real events, for fear that audiences just wouldn't believe it. While it's no demo disc, the BD's 1080p encode and DTS-HD MA 5.1 comfortably do all that is required of them.



# Not exactly a train wreck...

...but this luxurious murder-mystery still suffers from unnecessary updates

## → MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

Having just wrapped up a case in Istanbul, Belgian detective Hercule Poirot (Kenneth Branagh) embarks on a trip back to London on the lavish Orient Express. But whatever hopes he may have had for a peaceful journey are dashed when the train's route is blocked by an avalanche and one of his fellow passengers is murdered. Realising that everybody onboard is a suspect, Poirot races to find the killer's identity before the train is freed from its snowy confines.

Agatha Christie's classic whodunnit is so well known that it's hard to believe the book has only been adapted for the bigscreen once before. Like that 1974 version, this is a particularly handsomely mounted and star-studded affair, with the likes of Penélope Cruz, Willem Dafoe, Judi Dench, Johnny Depp, Derek Jacobi, Michelle Pfeiffer and Daisy Ridley joining Branagh (who also directs) onboard the train.

Unsurprisingly, given all of the talent involved – not to mention the quality of the source material – the central murder-mystery plot runs as smoothly as you'd expect. Where the film has problems are with a handful of additions to the story designed to pander to modern audiences: watching Poirot chase a suspect down a rickety viaduct like a Belgian James Bond may not be enough to completely derail the movie, but it does point towards a worrying lack of faith in viewers to watch anything that doesn't have at least one pointless action scene.

**Picture:** As Branagh discusses with some pride in the Blu-ray's extras, he shot *Murder on the Orient Express* on 65mm film and the resulting step-up in visual



The next *Star Wars* film was going to upset fans...

definition is clear to see in the AVC 2.40:1 Full HD encode. Textures in the characters' clothing and the ornate fixtures that adorn the train are meticulously rendered, while the richly saturated colour palette heightens the sense of luxury. Perfect contrast levels results in deep blacks packed full of shadow detail. **Audio:** The disc's DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack does an exceptional job of recreating the feeling of being on a train, conveying the confined acoustics of the carriages while also positioning discrete atmospheric effects all around you. The storm and avalanche (both Chapter 7) show that the mix is capable of much more dynamic effects, when need be.

**Extras:** The film is joined by a more extensive and informative set of bonuses than many blockbusters. These include a chat-track by Branagh and writer Michael Green, a *Making of...*, 13 deleted scenes, and seven featurettes focusing on Christie, Poirot, scoring the film, production design and the cast.



## HCC VERDICT

### Murder on the Orient Express

→ Twentieth Century Fox  
→ All-region BD → £25

**WE SAY:** Branagh's flawed bigscreen whodunnit does at least look utterly stunning in hi-def.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★



# Grin and bear it

This sweet-tempered and exceedingly funny family film is the latest – and perhaps most surprising – entry on that very short list of sequels that are better than their already excellent predecessors...



## → **PADDINGTON 2**

Having settled down with the Brown family in Windsor Gardens, Paddington's life is thrown into turmoil when he is falsely imprisoned for the theft of a rare pop-up book. With the real criminal still on the loose, the Browns spring into action – but what is a marmalade-loving bear to do when he's trapped behind bars with a bunch of hardened crooks?

An irresistibly charming and inclusive family adventure film, 2014's *Paddington* was one of the biggest and best cinematic surprises in a long time (just look at the trailers for this year's *Peter Rabbit* update to see the sort of abomination we could have

ended up with). This only makes it more amazing that this quick-witted follow-up not only matches the quality of its predecessor, but actually surpasses it in almost every way imaginable. It's the *Godfather Part II* of talking bear movies.

From Hugh Grant's dandyish turn as a villainous has-been actor to the Wes Anderson-like sense of whimsy and Chaplin-esque set-pieces that returning director Paul King brings to this lively, witty story, there's nothing about *Paddington 2* that doesn't hit the intended mark.

And if the first film proved to be an unlikely appeal for acceptance in the face of worries surrounding immigration, then this post-Brexit sequel is even more pointed in both its critique of prejudice and its

**Who'd-a-thunk it? A third *Paddington* film is currently in development**





*Paddington 2* looks like a Wes Anderson film – but isn't



celebration of the ways in which multiculturalism can enrich communities.

Laugh-out-loud funny, bursting with creativity and containing a heartwarming message about inclusiveness that we could all learn something from, *Paddington 2* is not just a great children's film. It's a great film, full stop – and you'd be a fool to miss it.

**Picture:** If you're the sort of AV-Holic that likes to marvel at individual strands of fur, then this is the 4K disc for you. Animation has often been a picture quality flagbearer, and this is a task *Paddington 2* (through its CG-created central character) adopts with relish. Whenever the titular bear is onscreen, this 2.40:1 image invites you to drink in the crisp, fluid, bristly detail. He blends in

perfectly with the live-action footage, which is quite an achievement.

This pixel finery isn't limited to Padders, though. This is an impressively clean and sharp image overall, picking out details in the excellent set design (such as the interiors of the court in Chapter 4) and London locations.

Contrast seems perfectly judged. There's a strong sense of HDR impact over the comparatively muted 1080p image, resulting in environments feeling warmer and more refined. Sequences such as the opening Peru-set animation play out with a completely different feel via this 4K HDR presentation.

While the disc delivers strong, stable black levels, it's the rich colour palette that makes more of an impression. Reds, in particular, be they Paddington's hat or a painted door, gain an extra lustre here, and the movie's overall riot of tones is captured perfectly.

Overall, this is fine-looking 4K release.

**Audio:** *Paddington 2* takes a step up from its predecessor's DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack by also offering a Dolby Atmos mix. Before anybody gets too excited, it's not exactly the most dynamic object-based track you'll encounter.

Use of the height channels is mainly limited to giving the overall mix a greater sense of space, although they are occasionally given discrete aural effects to work with – the harp strings in Chapter 3 that act as a flying swan's musical signature and exist entirely within the height layer being one example; the sound of gears turning as Paddington climbs up a clock tower in Chapter 9 another.

Otherwise, it's an excellent piece of sound design that makes convincing use of the surrounds, delivers dialogue flawlessly and boasts incredible musicality.

**Extras:** Our only bone of contention with the first film's Blu-ray was the utterly lacklustre collection of bonus features Studiocanal assembled on the disc: just three featurettes (only one of which lasted for longer than three minutes) and a gallery of stills and poster art. While still not exactly overburdened with extras, those that accompany this Blu-ray release of *Paddington 2* drill a lot further into the filmmaking process.

Director/co-writer Paul King kicks things off with an engaging audio commentary that goes into a fair amount of detail about the making of the movie. Meanwhile, *Paddington 2: The Challenges of Making the Film* (four minutes) finds animation director Pablo Grillo addressing the difficulties of bringing the title character to life and integrating him into a live-action setting.

"*Rain on the Roof*" with Phoenix Buchanan (two minutes) is a

fullscreen presentation of the amusing musical sequence that plays in a window during the movie's end credits.

Last up is a lively 34-minute BAFTA Q&A with Paul King, Pablo Grillo, producer David Heyman, co-writer Simon Farnaby and Hugh Grant.



Sally Hawkins (below) reprises her role as Mary Brown



## HCC VERDICT

### *Paddington 2*

→ Studiocanal → UHD Blu-ray & Region B BD → £30

**WESAY:** A delightful 4K outing for this wonderfully witty and clever feel-good masterpiece.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★





## Arcade Action

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. **Rik Henderson** checks out a videogame vying for time on your home cinema system...



### Monster Hunter: World

Capcom → PS4, Xbox One, Windows PC → £55

The *Monster Hunter* series has been around for a fair while, but it's mainly appeared on Nintendo handhelds so hasn't really been on our radar. At least, not in picture or audio terms.

*Monster Hunter: World* changes that dramatically, being the first built from the ground up for the latest generation of games consoles. And it throws in a number of bells and whistles just for those with systems and screens to suit – including HDR, higher-than-HD visuals and a marvellous music score.

The game itself is similar to its forebears but on a far greater scale. There's something of a *Pokémon* for adults feel about it, with multiple monsters scattered around the lands that you must catch. However, in this instance, 'catch' essentially means 'kill'. And the monsters aren't so much cute and pocket-sized as massive and wanting to bite your head off.

Luckily, you get a selection of similarly oversized, sometimes unwieldy but always powerful weaponry to tackle them with and an enormous open-world setting to do it in. Plus, thanks to some incredible in-game artificial intelligence, there's plenty of choice in how you go about it. You are treated to great freedom in when you take on quests, in a varied and detailed landscape that feels alive. A refreshing alternative to many games on the market today.

Developer Capcom also gives you plenty of choice when it comes to visual presentation. Standard PlayStation 4 and Xbox One console owners get a decent game that looks pretty, but those with a PS4 Pro or Xbox One X get options that can style the game to your choosing.

Opt for 'Resolution Mode' and you get up to 1,800p visuals. Or, if you favour frame rates, it locks at 1080p and gives you better – albeit varied – levels of smoothness. Then there's 'Graphics Mode', which adds detail in the background that the others lack – again in favour of a locked 1080p.

This sums the game up perfectly. *Monster Hunter: World* is essentially a sandbox for your own unique adventures, tuned to your tastes in gameplay and graphics. That makes it a must-buy for us and a worthy first home console entrant for the series.



## Starship Troopers: Traitor of Mars

Sony Pictures → All-region BD  
£20



The best of the four DTV sequels to Paul Verhoeven's 1997 sci-fi satire released so far, this CG-animated flick finds actors Casper Van Dien and Dina Meyer reprising their roles

for another bug-battling adventure. Despite being unable to measure up to big-budget CG-animated features, the film's digital visuals still look pretty good thanks to this Blu-ray's crisp 1.78:1 Full HD encode, and are supported by a raucous DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundscape. Extras find Casper Van Dien and writer Ed Neumeier discussing the first film and its legacy.



## Attack on Titan: Season 2

Sony Pictures/Funimation  
Region B BD → £37



It's taken four long years, but fans of the phenomenally successful anime series finally have 12 more episodes of man-eating giant-slaying to sink their teeth into. While it

certainly doesn't provide *all* of the answers that we've been hoping for, there's no denying that this second season is every bit as exciting and shocking as the first. On top of its strong 1080p visuals and Dolby TrueHD audio (Japanese 2.0 and English 5.1), this handsome two-disc HD release packs plenty of interesting goodies including two episode commentaries, a pair of interviews and six *Inside the Episode* vignettes.



## Brawl in Cell Block 99

Universal Pictures → All-region BD  
£16



Having caught our attention with his shocking 2015 debut *Bone Tomahawk*, writer-director S. Craig Zahler returns with yet another unforgettable piece of pulp cinema. *Brawl in Cell Block*

99 is a very patient film; one that pays off its steady build-up with scenes of bone-crunching violence that are made all the more squirm-inducing by the force of this Blu-ray's DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio. The disc also scores well with its detailed 1.85:1 Full HD encode, but is let down by a paucity of extras: a 15-minute *Making of...* featurette is all you get.





Patrick Star enjoys a break from shooting *Spongebob Squarepants*



# Putting the Blue into UHD BD

Step into the 4K HDR-kissed waters of the Beeb's peerless documentary series

## → BLUE PLANET II

Narrator David Attenborough, composer Hans Zimmer, the geniuses at the BBC's Natural History Unit and some of the finest examples of our planet's weird and wonderful marine life are back for a sequel to 2001's much-loved *Blue Planet* series.

Broadcast last Winter across seven episodes, this is a first-class documentary, four years in the making and culled from over 6,000 hours of footage. Skilfully edited, and with Attenborough's sublime delivery, it results in a mesmerising, informative and gorgeous-looking way to spend a couple of evenings. It's entertaining too, rather than scholarly.

Yet perhaps the series' greatest achievement is the way it has turned the issue of plastic pollution of our planet's oceans into a political topic of conversation. Because this is an issue that needs to be addressed if we hope to enjoy *Blue Planet III* in fifteen years' time...

**Picture:** Some may have sampled *Blue Planet II*'s 4K HDR (via HLG technology) debut on the BBC's iPlayer service, but no matter if you missed its 30-day window – this disc-based presentation is undoubtedly the best the show has ever looked.

Framed at 1.78:1, these 4K HDR pictures are routinely achingly beautiful, delivering refined, unblemished 4K detail for your display to bathe in. As with *Planet Earth II* before it, the often leisurely pacing of the camera (and its subjects) pays dividends here. Images are pin-sharp, and the sense of depth remarkable.

The wide colour presentation is another strong point. There are plenty of blues, naturally, some made vivid by sunlight, others darkening to near black (the opening shots of Episode 4 are a fine example of the variety on show). These play off against other vivid primaries, all with subtle gradations. Comparisons with the set's superb 1080p encodes reveal a fuller, richer colour palette.

Furthering this sense of a window on the world is *Blue Planet II*'s HDR presentation, which teases out natural highlights in the cinematography. Much of the impact here comes from the interplay between sunlight and water, but a sequence of thunderclouds rolling in (Episode 4, Chapter 3) highlights its effectiveness with darker tones.

**Audio:** DTS-HD MA 5.1 is the wrapping for *Blue Planet II*'s artful soundscapes, where score, location effects and Attenborough's instantly recognisable tones come together extremely well. It's not exactly typical home cinema demo-fodder (there's obviously a shortage of room-rattling explosions), but these soundtracks counter by being expertly balanced, tonally rich and perfectly suited to the onscreen visuals. Best is how the sound team has captured the remarkable gurgles, splashes and squeaks of aquatic life, and layered them lavishly throughout the mix.

**Extras:** There are no bonus bits to be found on the set's trio of UHD platters – instead, the bundled three Full HD discs add in additional content, in the form of brief *Blue Planet II Diaries*, at the end of each episode (not accessible from the menu).



The *Blue Planet II* team spent roughly 6,000 hours filming underwater



## HCC VERDICT

### *Blue Planet II*

→ BBC Worldwide → UHD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £40

**WE SAY:** A stupendously good-looking – and smart-sounding – release for a superb series.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★☆☆☆

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★





# Taking care of Atmos business

Wishing there was a 3D soundtrack on *BR 2049*'s UK Blu-ray? It's time to import

## → **BLADE RUNNER 2049**

It seems borderline miraculous that director Denis Villeneuve has delivered a belated sequel to a fan-favourite film that doesn't feel like a travesty. Yes, it can come across as a little ponderous and detached, but *2049* is a still a real treat – beautiful to look at, cleverly scripted and smart enough to expand on the original's themes.

**Picture:** This US import 4K Blu-ray does excellent justice to Villeneuve's gorgeous imagery.

Detail levels, in particular, are sensational. The film was shot at 3.4K and given a 4K Digital Intermediate for cinematic distribution. Happily the immaculate transfer captures every bit of this strong source resolution, delivering some of the cleanest, sharpest pictures around.

The use of high dynamic range (HDR) is relatively restrained, but this isn't necessarily a drawback. Its subtle approach means that, while highlights such as the city's neon flourishes and holographic adverts only look slightly bolder than they do in SDR, they don't stand out unnaturally. The film's tricky skin tones all look totally authentic too.

This isn't a showcase for HDR, but the...*2049* 4K image substantially improves the viewing experience over the Blu-ray iteration, without losing the feel of the original cinematography.

**Sound:** On this US release, the Dolby Atmos soundmix graces both the 4K and 1080p discs, and it's sensational. As soon as the movie opens with the familiar, colossal, down-sliding bass hit, you know you're in for something special, and what follows doesn't disappoint.



The role of 'K' was written specifically with Ryan Gosling in mind



The sheer scale of the soundstage – especially in the mix of Benjamin Wallfisch/Hans Zimmer's Vangelis-inspired score – is incredible, delivered with gorgeous clarity and depth. There's consistent and imaginative use of every channel, too, and crisp, subtle detailing that's never overwhelmed by the film's epic atmospherics. This is an Atmos track to savour, and will have UK fans without 4K setups considering an import, because Sony's UK BD offered a flat DTS-HD track instead.

**Extras:** Found on this set's Region-free BD, *Blade Runner 2049*'s extras aren't quite the same as on the UK two-disc Blu-ray we looked at last issue. You get the two 20-minute-ish featurettes covering production design and casting; six *Blade Runner 101* mini featurettes; a 15-minute anime mini-movie following the 2022 'black out' incident; and two more prequel shorts directed by Luke Scott. But three other six-minute featurettes have been retired...

### HCC VERDICT

#### *Blade Runner 2049*

→ Warner Bros. → UHD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £33 (US Import)

**WE SAY:** This beautiful sci-fi movie benefits from a princely 4K image and exquisite Atmos track.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

## American Made [4K]

Universal Pictures → UHD Blu-ray & Region B BD → £30



Tom Cruise heads up this comic-tinged sorta-true story about drug runner/CIA operative Barry Seal's exploits in the 1970s and '80s – think of it as a light-footed counterpart to *Narcos*. Universal's 4K Blu-ray, presumably based on the film's 2K DI, fares much better than the 1080p version when it comes to handling director Doug Liman's extreme colour grading (and looks sharper), leading to an image that's more balanced and offers more clarity. Yet it still feels uniquely off-kilter for a modern A-list picture. Audio remains the same DTS:X mix; extras are housed on the 1080p disc.



## Something Wild

The Criterion Collection → Region B BD £28



As it doesn't look like we'll be getting the restored Blu-ray edition of *The Silence of the Lambs* that Criterion recently released in the US, the label's UK arm has seemingly decided to give us a different film from the same director. Seven years after it hit the US, this Blu-ray of Jonathan Demme's screwy 1985 road movie still holds up well with its rich colours and well-resolved grain. The DTS-HD MA 2.0 soundtrack is a little constrained, but dialogue and music are presented perfectly. The original trailer, and interviews with the director and screenwriter, are the disc's only extras.



## Loving Vincent

Altitude → All-region BD £18



If this exploration into the events surrounding Vincent van Gogh's death is remembered more for its visuals than anything else, it's simply because they are so amazing. Every single one of its 65,000 frames was hand-painted, over live-action footage, by a team of over 100 artists. A film of rare, breathtaking beauty, *Loving Vincent* is a joy to experience on Blu-ray, with the 1.37:1 Full HD image showcasing the rich colours and vivid brush strokes present in every frame. Worthwhile extras include a half-hour Q&A, cast and crew interviews, two *Making of...* featurettes and a reel of Kickstarter update videos.



## Ice Cold in Alex: 60th Anniversary Edition

Studiocanal → Region B BD £23



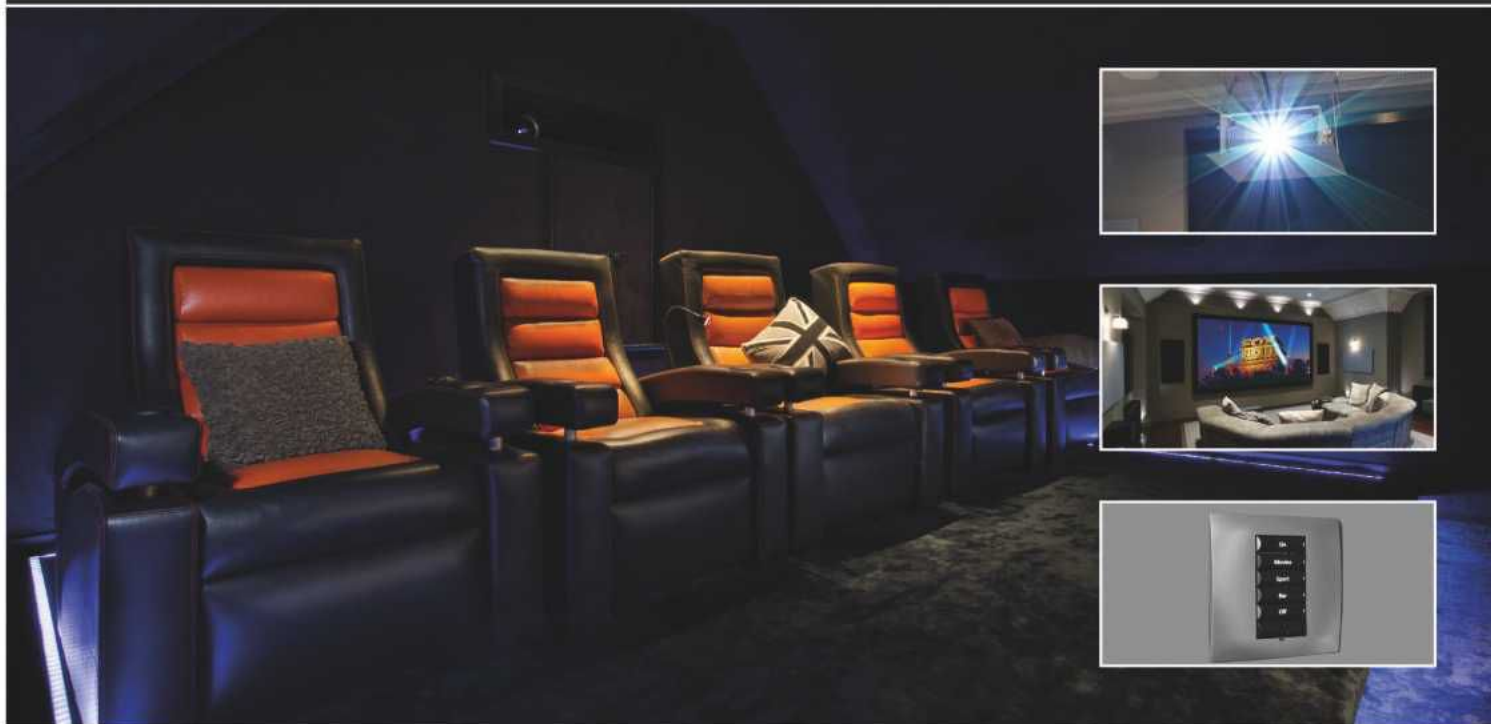
A rousing adventure or just one long advert for a terrible beer brand? Whatever your stance on J. Lee Thompson's 1958 wartime drama, there's no denying that the new 4K restoration underlying this celebratory Blu-ray re-release brings a fresh lustre to the film's 1.66:1-framed black-and-white photography. As well as the Sylvia Sims interview, John Mills' home movie footage, trailer and photo gallery that appeared on the original 2011 Blu-ray, this new release adds pieces about the film and its director by academics Melanie Williams and Steve Chibnall.





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'Batter up!'



DISC  
OF THE  
MONTH

# Back from the grave again

Criterion digs up George A. Romero's zombie horror and gives it a Blu-ray release to die for

## → NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD

A visit to a cemetery in rural Pennsylvania to lay flowers on their father's grave turns into a nightmare for siblings Barbara (Judith O'Dea) and Johnny (Russell Streiner) when they are attacked by a strange man. Fleeing for her life, Barbara takes refuge in an abandoned farmhouse with a disparate band of survivors. As more and more sinister figures gather outside the house, the group discover the shocking truth: the dead are rising from their graves to devour the flesh of the living...

It can be hard today to quite grasp the impact that George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* had on its release in 1968. Shot on a tiny budget by a group of Pittsburgh locals wanting to make the switch from commercials to movies, this amateur production rewrote the rules of the zombie film and – while it might seem incredibly tame in an age of gory TV shows like *The Walking Dead* – shocked audiences with its scenes of ghouls munching human flesh.

*Night of the Living Dead* is perhaps no longer capable of alarming modern viewers in the same way, but still impresses in other areas. Making a virtue of its budgetary constraints, the quasi-documentary feel Romero gives the film serves to reinforce the sense of dread permeating the story. And then there's the film's African American hero Ben (Duane Jones), who has as much to fear from the white posse hunting the undead as he does from the zombies themselves – a neat socio-political undertone that sadly remains relevant.



### HCC VERDICT

#### *Night of the Living Dead*

→ The Criterion Collection

→ Region B BD → £28

**WE SAY:** This seminal horror classic finally gets the Blu-ray it deserves. Now, what about *Dawn...* and *Day...*?

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★

**Picture:** *Night of the Living Dead* has been released twice before on Blu-ray in the UK. The first issue, from Optimum Releasing, looked okay except for the fact that the image was cropped on all four sides. The second, from Network, presented the 1.37:1 image in full, but in far rougher shape and suffering from 35 seconds of seemingly arbitrary cuts.

This Criterion release is based on a brand-new 4K restoration from the original 35mm camera negative. The result, as you'd expect, is the definitive home release of the film, delivering a consistency and clarity that far outstrips all other iterations. Even if (like us) you've seen *Night of the Living Dead* countless times before, we guarantee that you've never seen it looking quite so spectacular.

**Audio:** The LPCM monoaural soundtrack has been given a thorough clean-up, although this can't do anything about its source-related limitations. Still, dialogue is clear and natural, while the stock music used throughout the film sounds about as good as you could hope for.

**Extras:** The first platter in this two-disc set serves up a pair of filmmaker and cast audio commentaries recorded for Elite's old US DVD, plus an unrestored HD presentation of the 16mm workprint edit of the film (titled *Night of Anubis* and looking every bit as rough as you'd expect). The second platter adds a host of new and archival interviews (including a chat with Guillermo del Toro, Frank Darabont and Robert Rodriguez about the film's impact); a 2012 festival Q&A with Romero; dailies footage; trailers; TV and radio spots; and much, much more...



## Jeepers Creepers 3

101 Films → All-region BD  
£18



Set between the first and second films in the series, this belated sequel was apparently a decade in the making.

To be frank, it wasn't worth the wait. Despite teasing that it will finally reveal the Creeper's secret origins, it soon forgets about that sub-plot in favour of trotting out overly familiar kill sequences – albeit now with ugly Syfy Channel-quality VFX. This cheapskate sequel has received a suitably threadbare Blu-ray with no extras and not even a 'Set-Up' sub-menu – meaning you have to cycle through the audio streams with the 'Audio' button on your deck's remote.



## Flatliners

Sony Pictures → All-region BD  
£25



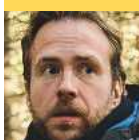
As difficult as it is to imagine anybody crying out for a dull and poorly executed remake of the daft 1990 psychological

chiller, it's even harder to imagine anybody asking for it to be released on Blu-ray with an Auro-3D soundtrack. But that's just what Sony UK has given us. Given that Auro-3D adoption make Atmos and DTS:X look positively mainstream, we weren't especially worried about not being in a position to review the object-based track in full, but can confirm the DTS-HD MA 5.1 fallback is very lively. The disc's visuals impress too. Extras include interviews and nine deleted scenes.



## The Ritual

Entertainment One → R2 DVD  
£20



It eschews the handycam horror aesthetic, but this story about four old chums lost in a remote forest during a hiking holiday in Sweden could easily have been re-titled *The Norse God Project*. Lack of originality aside, this UK-produced fright flick does what it sets out to do extremely well and boasts some terrific creature effects. Denied a hi-def release, *The Ritual* lands on DVD with a fairly drab anamorphic 2.00:1 transfer and atmospheric DD 5.1 sonics. Bonuses are limited to eight extremely brief EPK-style interviews.



## Thelma

Thunderbird Releasing → Region B BD  
£23



Norwegian filmmaker Joachim Trier delivers his version of *Carrie* with this tale of a shy college student from

a religious family, whose attraction to another girl triggers strange seizures that seem linked to deadly supernatural abilities. While Trier's film skews towards the more restrained and intimate end of the horror spectrum, those viewers who seek it out will be amply rewarded with a moving story backed up by beautiful performances and exquisite imagery. That last aspect feeds into this Blu-ray's striking 2.40:1 encode, partnered here by a potent DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix.



# Another piece of the puzzle

The Jigsaw Killer died years ago, so who is keeping his deadly legacy alive now?

## → JIGSAW

Five strangers awaken in a barn with a bucket on their heads and chains around their necks. A taped message states that only an offering of blood can set them free and then the chains begin to tighten, pulling them towards wall-mounted buzzsaws...

If the fourth *Friday the 13th* film taught audiences anything it's that you should never trust any horror sequel that claims to be ...*The Final Chapter*, even if it kills off its villain. In the case of the *Saw* franchise, there had already been four more instalments since series baddie John Kramer (aka 'The Jigsaw Killer') bit the dust in 2006's *Saw III*. The fact that 2010's *Saw: The Final Chapter* has turned out not to be quite so final shouldn't really surprise.

However, despite the extended hiatus, at its core *Jigsaw* really is business as usual for the franchise. What lifts it above the less successful sequels is the presence of directing duo Michael and Peter Spierig behind the camera. It's a step down from their last film, 2014's superb *Predestination*, but the pair bring a similar level of polish and flair to *Jigsaw* that was notably absent in most of the films.

**Picture:** There's a shift here to a more rural setting for the traps, yet *Jigsaw* largely adheres to the grimy aesthetic of the previous instalments, which provides plenty of detailing in the disc's AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode.

Colour grading frequently pushes the palette towards blue tones, which sometimes results in some



Up to her neck in trouble...

rather flat looking blacks, but exterior locations appear extremely natural and have a real sense of depth.

**Audio:** *Jigsaw*'s Dolby Atmos soundtrack doesn't have quite as much impact as you may expect. While we can't fault the mix's effective deployment of the rear and surround speakers, height effects are surprisingly restrained and are sometimes overwhelmed by other elements in the mix. Given that there are a couple of set-pieces that seem almost designed specifically to take advantage of overhead sonics, this is a real missed opportunity.

**Extras:** Bonuses take the form of a chat-track by three of *Jigsaw*'s producers; a *Making of...* documentary that – at 82 minutes – is almost as long as the film itself; and a short tour of the film's killer props.



## HCC VERDICT

### Jigsaw

→ Lionsgate → Region B BD  
→ £25

**WE SAY:** A solid return for the horror franchise on a well-specced Blu-ray. But, please, no more...

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★



'Go on, call me China's answer to Rambo one more time...'



# Scratch that '80s action itch

Get ready to experience the biggest box office blockbuster you've never even heard of...

## → WOLF WARRIOR II

Unless you are a fan of Asian action cinema then chances are you won't have heard of *Wolf Warrior II*. But despite being given only the most cursory of cinema releases in both the UK and US, it's the highest-grossing Chinese film of all time with worldwide takings in excess of \$870m (\$854m of which came from its homeland). This propelled it into sixth place on the list of 2017's biggest box office hits, ahead of *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* and *Wonder Woman*!

All very impressive. But what about the film itself? Thankfully, there's no requirement to have seen the original *Wolf Warrior* as the sequel quickly sets up Leng Feng (Jing Wu)'s badass fighting skills (brawling underwater with pirates) and his righteous ways (getting sent to prison for kicking a nasty slumlord through a car windscreen). Drummed out of the army, Feng ends up living in an unnamed African country. When it explodes into civil war, Feng volunteers to rescue a doctor who is also wanted by the armed rebels and their coterie of mercenaries (led by Frank Grillo's Big Daddy).

What follows is basically the same sort of thing that Jackie Chan used to give audiences throughout the 1980s and '90s: lots of spectacular fights and stunts, interspersed with melodrama, jingoism, exotic travelogue footage and awkward racial stereotypes.

*Wolf Warrior II* doesn't exactly break new ground for storytelling, but does cement Jing Wu's place as a *bona fide* action superstar. It certainly doesn't hurt



that Wu (who also co-wrote and directed the film) brought *Atomic Blonde* and *Captain America: Civil War* stunt coordinator Sam Hargrave to choreograph the film's action scenes.

Here's hoping for more of the same, albeit anchored to a more creative storyline, from the upcoming *Wolf Warrior III*.

**Picture:** *Wolf Warrior II*'s 2.40:1 Blu-ray encode looks pretty damn great. Shot digitally at 6K (but finished as a 2K Digital Intermediate), the 1080p imagery is exceptionally crisp, revealing plenty of fine detailing in the locations, clothing, actors' faces, massive guns, etc. Colours, meanwhile, are richly saturated, making the most of the film's mix of brightly lit daytime exteriors and heavy grading on some interiors.

Only the general softness of CG effects shots and some minor banding hold this back from top marks.

**Audio:** Sadly, this UK comes unstuck with its audio presentation. While there's technically nothing wrong with the Dolby Digital 5.1 Mandarin language track provided here (which is full of chaotic surround effects and booming bass), it feels like a second-tier option when the film has been released on Blu-ray in other territories – including Well Go USA's North American release – with a choice of DTS-HD MA 7.1 and even DTS:X mixes.

**Extras:** Cine Asia's BD includes a trio of behind-the-scenes featurettes – *Wu Jing: The Stunt Man*, *Tank & Furious* and *Director in Action*. Sadly, with none of them clocking in at much over four minutes, they can only offer a tantalisingly small glimpse into the film's production. A 30-second trailer is also included.

### HCC VERDICT

#### *Wolf Warrior II*

→ Cine Asia → Region B BD  
→ £18

**WE SAY:** Lacklustre extras and 'lossy' audio take the shine off an enjoyable old-school action romp.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★



## House

Eureka - Masters of Cinema  
Region B BD → £17



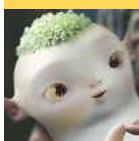
Eight years after it joined the Masters of Cinema DVD range, this nutty 1977 Japanese horror flick finally receives a Blu-ray upgrade. Bursting at the seams with flesh-eating pianos, evil

kitty-cats, killer light fixtures and kung-fu fighting, filmmaker Nobuhiko Obayashi's surreal and entirely self-aware film is a treat – one whose lurid cartoonish visuals are well-served by the clean and colourful restoration showcased by this disc's 1.37:1 1080p encode. The LPCM dual-mono soundtrack shows signs of having been given a thorough clean-up too. Disc-based extras include a scholarly video essay and eight interviews.



## Monster Hunt

Manga Entertainment → Region B BD  
£16



There's been a lot of rubbish written recently about *The Last Jedi*'s poor performance at the Chinese box office,

but as this weird family adventure film about a man who gives birth to a small monster was China's biggest ever box office smash when released in 2015, it's clear that there are some big cultural differences at work. As bizarre as it is, *Monster Hunt* hits BD with an attractive 2.40:1 Full HD encode (sadly not in the original 3D). The DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix comes into its own during action sequences. A very brief *Making of...* promo and a trailer are the only extras.



## The Housemaid

Montage Pictures → Region B BD  
£13



Vengeful spirits and forbidden love are the order of the day in this trip into the world of Vietnamese

horror cinema. Unfortunately, despite a strong start, *The Housemaid* soon seems to lose interest in its supernatural setup, burying it beneath more domestic strife. The final act does its best to pull it all together, but ultimately leaves you puzzling over a bunch of huge plot holes. On a more positive note, it's a handsome film, something that's made abundantly clear by this 1080p platter's vivid 2.40:1 encode. Extras are rather less impressive – there's a trailer and that's your lot.



# If it ain't brick, don't fix it...

LEGO's third animated movie appears content to offer more of the same

## → THE LEGO NINJAGO MOVIE

Being a teenager is tricky enough at the best of times. But it's even worse when your absentee father just happens to be the supervillain whose goal in life seems to be destroying your hometown.

That's the basic setup behind this third LEGO animated movie, which gives one of the toy brand's evergreen lines an irreverent makeover. However, unlike its predecessors, *The LEGO Ninjago Movie* doesn't get off to the strongest of starts, following a flat live-action framing device with an action-packed opening act that seems geared to younger viewers.

Thankfully, when our hero Lloyd (Dave Franco) accidentally unleashes the furry horror of Meowthra on Ninjago City, the film finally embraces its lunacy and delivers the sort of knowing laughs and witty references that have previously served the franchise so well (there's even a blink-and-you'll-miss it nod to the Tom Hardy drama *Locke*, of all things). Even so, it's hard not to notice how often the film retreads story beats that have already been covered in the previous LEGO movies. If the franchise has any hopes of continuing, future instalments will have to bring some fresh ideas to the toy box.

**Picture:** *The LEGO Ninjago Movie's* AVC 2.40:1 Full HD encode is on a par with the Blu-ray incarnations of its two predecessors. Colours are vibrant, black levels are rock-solid, and the overall sharpness of the image only



serves to highlight the little scratches and marks the animators have built into the LEGO bricks and characters. The live-action framing sequences are also exceptionally well rendered, with the film-like appearance providing a pleasing counterpoint to the pristine artificiality of the faux-stop-motion CG animation.

**Audio:** The disc's Dolby Atmos mix creates a lively 360-degree soundstage underpinned by deep low-end effects. Spatial cues are exquisitely positioned in the surround, rear and height speakers, and the panning around them is utterly seamless – all of which results in a truly impressive audio experience.

**Extras:** In addition to a fun filmmakers' commentary, the disc is loaded with brief behind-the-scenes featurettes, animated shorts, music videos, deleted scenes, outtakes and promos.



The film is completely unconnected to the long-running *LEGO Ninjago: Masters of Spinjitzu* TV 'toon

## HCC VERDICT

### The LEGO Ninjago Movie

→ Warner Bros. → All-region BD  
→ £25

**WE SAY:** Not LEGO's finest hour, but still a fun film that looks and sounds absolutely sensational on Blu-ray.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★



# Should you take the leap?

Find out if it's worth revisiting this fondly remembered time-travel series on BD

## → **QUANTUM LEAP: THE COMPLETE COLLECTION**

Determined to prove his theory that it is possible to travel back through one's own lifetime before government funding is pulled, Dr. Sam Beckett (Scott Bakula) experiments on himself, only for his consciousness to be catapulted back in time to inhabit another body. With the aid of his colleague Al (Dean Stockwell), who appears to him in the form of a hologram, Sam learns that he must alter the events of the past for the better before he can move on. Leaping from person to person across time, Sam keeps putting things right in the hope of one day making it back to his own body in his own time.

Running for five seasons between 1989 and 1993, *Quantum Leap* offers an unusual but entertaining twist on the usual time-travel paradigm. Despite limiting itself to just four decades (the 1950s to the 1980s), the core body/gender-swap (and in one case, species-swap) setup allows for a seemingly endless variety of stories – or at least more than sufficient to fill 97 episodes.

*Quantum Leap* also benefitted from excellent lead performances; Bakula's slightly dopy charm works perfectly with the show's fish-out-of-water aspects, and there's a real sense of friendship between Sam and Dean Stockwell's Al. Couple that with some particularly smart writing and a great sense of humour and it's easy to see why the show remains a fan-favourite some 25 years after it finished.

**Picture:** *Quantum Leap* may not be the best-looking Blu-ray release you'll ever see, but as the show was shot on 35mm film it definitely benefits from the



leap to the format. Colours appear authentic, if not especially dynamic, and detail levels show a notable uptick over the DVD release. Cropping issues on the second season episode *A Portrait for Troian* reveal that the 1.37:1-framed Blu-ray encodes are based on the same HD masters used for previous VOD and streaming releases of the show.

**Audio:** This Blu-ray boxset includes all of the original music (unlike the DVD sets, which replaced some songs), but falls down by only offering lossy Dolby Digital 2.0 soundtracks. This is made all the more annoying by the fact that the Mill Creek US Blu-ray boxset, released early last year, featured DTS-HD Master Audio 2.0 audio.

**Extras:** The only extras this 22-disc set can muster are eight episode intros by Scott Bakula, a 21-minute retrospective featurette with Bakula, Stockwell and series creator Donald P. Bellisario, and short interview snippets relating to the show's fans.



Series creator Donald P. Bellisario still hopes to make a *Quantum Leap* film



## HCC VERDICT

### Quantum Leap: The Complete Collection

→ Fabulous Films → Region B BD  
→ £150

**WE SAY:** A modest, if expensive, Blu-ray outing for this enjoyable and inventive slice of cult TV.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★

## Charley Varrick

Indicator → Region B BD  
£16



Don Siegel directs this taut crime thriller featuring Walter Matthau as a bank robber who gets into hot water when it turns out that the loot he's stolen belongs to the Vegas

mob. One of the first releases to come from Indicator's new licensing deal with Universal, *Charley Varrick* finds the label rescuing yet another remarkable film from relative obscurity with a triumphant Blu-ray release. The 1.85:1 transfer here is wonderful, and superb extras include a 75-minute *Making of...*, lengthy chats with Siegel and Matthau that play over the film, and the cut-down Super 8 version.



## Blue Collar

Indicator → Region B BD  
£16



Paul Schrader's 1978 directorial debut dives headlong into the dark side of the American dream with its story

about three car-factory workers (played by Harvey Keitel, Yaphet Kotto and Richard Pryor) who decide to rob their union, only to stumble across proof of their bosses' corruption in the process. Indicator's Blu-ray release does this underrated classic full justice with authentically grainy 1.85:1 visuals and surprisingly potent LPCM mono audio. Extensive extras include a commentary by Schrader and an appreciation of the movie by filmmaker Keith Gordon.



## The Witches

Arrow Academy → Region A/B BD  
£20



Oddly, this 1967 Italian anthology has nothing whatsoever to do with witches. Instead, it's a collection of five shorts

starring Silvana Mangano and helmed by the likes of Visconti, Pasolini and De Sica. Despite the talent assembled behind the camera, *The Witches* proves to be a wildly uneven affair – although it's definitely worth a look for fans of the filmmakers. Arrow's Blu-ray includes new remasters of both the original 111-minute cut and the 104-minute English-language version. Meanwhile, Italian film expert Tim Lucas is on hand with another of his fact-packed commentary tracks.







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Collecting...

# All aboard!

To celebrate the release of *Murder on the Orient Express*, **Team HCC** rides the rails with 10 of the best locomotive-based movies vying for a spot in your film collection...

## UNSTOPPABLE

Tony Scott's final film as a director (released in 2010) puts Denzel Washington's experienced railman and Chris Pine's novice aboard an out-of-control freight train hurtling through America's rust belt – time, then, for metallic carnage and various acts of derring-do. On the surface, *Unstoppable* is a regular Hollywood disaster movie, but Scott's knack of crafting tension ensures a white-knuckle ride, while camera work and sound design are first-class, rather than Advanced Off-Peak Super-Saver.

**Get it:** Fox's 2011 BD benefits from a muscular, dynamic DTS-HD 5.1 mix and detail-rich 1080p encode, plus some stand-out extras – Scott's commentary track and the 30-minute doc *Unleashing Unstoppable* are essential if you want to spend time in the company of a film-making genius.



## MIDNIGHT MEAT TRAIN

Like 1972's *Death Line* and 2004's *Creep* before it, this eye-popping frightener unleashes a wave of horror on an underground train network. Based on a Clive Barker short story, *Midnight Meat Train* (2008) stars Bradley Cooper as a photographer on the trail of a serial killer dubbed the 'Subway Butcher' (Vinnie Jones), only to find more than he bargained for under the city streets...

**Get it:** Lionsgate's UK Blu-ray sports sharp Full HD visuals and killer DTS-HD MA 7.1 sonics.



## SOURCE CODE

Jake Gyllenhaal leads this twisty flick about a soldier involved in a top-secret experiment that allows him to repeatedly live out the final few minutes of another person's life in order to try and identify the bomber of a Chicago commuter train. The *Groundhog Day* of action thrillers, *Source Code* is an intelligent, exhilarating and explosively paced film that will keep you intrigued throughout.

**Get it:** The UK BD includes a trio of picture-in-picture viewing modes, and can be picked up for little more than a fiver these days.



## THE TAKING OF PELHAM ONE TWO THREE

As much as we enjoyed Tony Scott's glossy 2009 remake, it doesn't hold a candle to Joseph Sargent's 1974 original. This tense, gritty and gripping heist-thriller pits Walter Matthau's hangdog cop against four masked criminals who have hijacked an NYC subway train.

**Get it:** Ignore the barebones UK Blu-ray and import Kino Lorber's superior Region A-locked '42nd Anniversary Edition' from the US instead.



## SNOWPIERCER

South Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-ho's first English-language film is a weird and wacky sci-fi about a society that develops onboard a train in a world ravaged by global warming.

**Get it:** There's never been a UK Blu-ray, so you'll have to import. The South Korean release has 7.1 audio, but the US and Australian Blu-rays have more English-friendly extras.







## THE POLAR EXPRESS

Adapted from Chris Van Allsburg's 1985 children's book, Robert Zemeckis's computer-animated, motion-captured, musical fantasy has become a festive favourite with film fans since its release in 2004. Just don't get too freaked out by the cold, lifeless eyes of the various CG incarnations of Tom Hanks that populate the story...

**Get it:** 3D is the only way to go if you really want to watch *The Polar Express* looking its very best. However, make sure you pick up the 2011 Full HD 3D Blu-ray and not the earlier 2009 anaglyph stereoscopic platter by mistake.



## TRAIN TO BUSAN

What's worse than snakes on a plane? How about zombies on a train? That's the killer hook behind this relentless and gory South Korean chiller, which combines superbly orchestrated terror and moving family drama to create one of the best zombie films to come along in years.

**Get it:** If you can play Region A discs, then you should import the US release for its superb DTS:X soundtrack. If not, then the UK disc's DTS-HD MA 5.1 is an acceptable substitute. Animated prequel *Seoul Station* is also available on Blu-ray here.



## THE LADY VANISHES

This 1938 Hitchcock classic stars Margaret Lockwood as an English tourist travelling by train through Europe. When an old lady she met mysteriously vanishes, she sets out to discover what happened, regardless of the fact that none of her fellow passengers seem to remember her ever being there...

**Get it:** Although a very good-looking UK Blu-ray was released by Network in 2015, those with a multi-region deck would be much better off grabbing the 2011 Criterion Collection disc from the US, which looks just as good and has far superior bonus features.



## RUNAWAY TRAIN

John Voight and Eric Roberts play escaped convicts, and Rebecca De Mornay a railroad worker, all stuck on a runaway freight train in this hugely entertaining and surprisingly beautiful Oscar-nominated 1985 action-thriller based on an original script by Akira Kurosawa. The result was one of the crown jewels in the Cannon Films catalogue.

**Get it:** Arrow's 2013 Region B Blu-ray release plays host to a pleasing 1080p presentation, effective LPCM 2.0 audio and new interviews with John Voight, Eric Roberts and director Andrei Konchalovsky.

TOP PICK



## THE GENERAL

Inspired by a real event known as the 'Great Locomotive Chase' that took place during the American Civil War, this 1926 silent action-comedy finds Buster Keaton playing an engineer who heads into enemy territory to save his train – and his fiancée – from the Yankee spies who have run off with them. A tour de force of breathtaking stunts and laugh-out-loud gags, *The General* may have been a flop with critics and audiences on its original release, but today it is rightly regarded as the actor's magnum opus.

**Get it:** *The General* made its UK Blu-ray debut towards the end of last year as one of three new 4K restorations (alongside *Sherlock, Jr.* and *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*) in a Buster Keaton boxset released as part of Eureka's Masters of Cinema range.

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# SELECT

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## HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★★☆☆
Dire	★★★☆☆

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed

## TOP 10 Televisions

**01 Sony KD-65ZD9** → £3,500 ★★★★★

Sony finished 2016 on a high with this full-array LED Bravia (with advanced local dimming tech) that claims a 1,800-nit peak brightness and DV support. Cinematic, sublime pictures – the 100in version [HCC #282] is even more impressive. HCC #267

**02 Sony KD-55A1** → £3,500 ★★★★★

Another Sony set due a Dolby Vision upgrade, this 55in OLED dazzles with its image quality (including superb motion processing), hidden Acoustic Surface speaker technology and eye-catching styling. HCC #275

**03 LG OLED65E7**

→ £5,000 ★★★★★

3D playback is dropped, but the E7 offers welcome picture improvements over last year's E6, particularly brightness and near-black talents. Supports Dolby Vision. HCC #274

**04 Panasonic TX-55EZ952**

→ £2,500 ★★★★★

A 55in OLED TV with an effortlessly naturalistic performance, although not as bright as some rivals. Gorgeous, understated design and premium build quality. HCC #277

**05 Philips 55POS9002**

→ £2,200 ★★★★★

Philips' second-gen Android-powered OLED takes a more refined approach to its processing, focusing on balanced cinematic imagery. Ambilight, as usual, boosts your immersion. HCC #276

**06 Samsung UE49MU7000**

→ £1,000 ★★★★★

Not one of Samsung's top-flight TVs, but a cracking mid-range 49in model that presents 4K and HD material with bright, rich colours and stable blacks. Good choice for an affordable setup. HCC #277

**07 Samsung QE65Q9F**

→ £4,900 ★★★★★

This premium 'QLED' screen outguns rivals when it comes to brightness and visual impact. Routinely stunning, but edge LED lighting has some niggles. Supports Samsung's HDR 10+ format. HCC #273

**08 Sony KD-55XE8596**

→ £1,100 ★★★★★

A real 4K bargain, combining a 55in screen with a solid picture performance. HDR doesn't zing due to a lack of sheer brightness, but it benefits from backlight stability. Impressive with regular HD, too. HCC #278

**09 Panasonic TX-65EX750**

→ £1,900 ★★★★★

A (surprise!) 3D-capable LED screen that offers well-controlled backlighting, pleasing 4K clarity and good HD upscaling. Not the brightest around, and some colour inconsistencies. HCC #279

**10 LG 55SJ850V**

→ £1,300 ★★★★★

Backlight distractions hinder this set's performance in low-lit rooms, but it's a strong all-rounder, offering Dolby Vision HDR, WebOS smarts, well-rounded sonics and a bargain price tag. HCC #276

## TOP 5 Blu-ray movies

**War for the Planet of the Apes [Ultra HD Blu-ray]**

The final part of Fox's trilogy hits 4K disc with a subtle Atmos mix and crisp, shadow-rich visuals. The movie itself is surprisingly intimate, with lead ape Caesar taking centre stage. HCC #280 ★★★★★

**Spider-Man: Homecoming [Ultra HD Blu-ray]**

Peter Parker comes of age (with some help from Iron Man) in this winning mix of superhero action and John Hughes-style high school antics. Sony's 4K BD packs a Dolby Vision encode. HCC #280 ★★★★★

**It**

Bill Skarsgard terrifies as Pennywise in this smart and slick adaptation of Stephen King's imaginative novel. Creepy sonics, crisp 1080p visuals and some meaty extras round out the BD package. HCC #282 ★★★★★

**Wonder Woman**

The highlight so far of DC's Extended Universe gives its heroine plenty of opportunity to shine in its WWI-era origin story, and the BD challenges your speaker setup with a Dolby Atmos soundmix. HCC #278 ★★★★★

**Dunkirk**

The soundmix here may be only a 'flat' 5.1 DTS-HD affair, but it's a masterclass in sonic engineering, crafting the tension in Chris Nolan's gorgeous-looking and refreshingly compact WWII drama/thriller. HCC #281 ★★★★★



# TOP 10 Blu-rays



## 01 Oppo UDP-203 → £650 ★★★★★

Oppo refreshes its player hardware with a superb universal design with Ultra HD playback (including Dolby Vision via firmware update). Packed with user adjustments and connectivity. No apps or Darbee processing, though. HCC #269



## 02 Oppo UDP-205 → £1,400 ★★★★★

This pricey, peerless UHD deck flaunts universal disc playback, asynchronous USB input, headphone amp and balanced stereo outs amongst its audiophile features. One for musos. HCC #274



## 03 Sony UBP-X800 → £270 ★★★★★

Sony embraces UHD Blu-ray with a full-width, sturdy design that'll also spin DVD-A and SACD platters. A great all-rounder, but no current Dolby Vision support or word on an update. HCC #274



## 04 Panasonic DMP-UB900 → £370 ★★★★★

The Ultra HD Blu-ray format got an inspiring debut in Panasonic's multi-talented deck that offers a sterling picture performance, 4K-enabled VOD apps and analogue audio outs. No DV. HCC #259



## 05 Cambridge Audio CXUHD → £800 ★★★★★

The lack of analogue outputs is a surprise considering CA's heritage, but this universal (and DV-capable) deck sounds sweet over its digital outs. As with Oppo's UDP-203, a MediaTek SoC is used. HCC #279



## 06 Panasonic DMP-UB700 → £300 ★★★★★

Shorn of some of the audiophile niceties of the UB900 (including multichannel analogue outputs), but still a safe pair of hands with your 4K BDs. And at a bargain price. HCC #270



## 07 Arcam FMJ UDP411 → £800 ★★★★★

Pristine visuals – including upscaled SD – and a classy sonic performance grant this Arcam instant appeal. The design and build is commensurate with the premium price tag. HCC #244



## 08 Panasonic DMP-UB300 → £130 ★★★★★

Great 4K imagery from this bargain deck, but you might prefer to up your budget for the UB700 – no split HDMI, optical/coaxial or Wi-Fi connections here. Half-size design for an easy install. HCC #272



## 09 Samsung UBD-K8500 → £180 ★★★★★

Debut Ultra HD Blu-ray player that finds fans courtesy of its sensible price point (now even lower), connected smarts and eye-catching visuals. Build quality is a little uninspiring. HCC #260



## 10 Samsung UBD-M9500 → £230 ★★★★★

Second-gen 4K player that adds features (mobile BD streaming, 360-degree image support) but removes 3D playback capability. As before, the chassis is curved. UHD discs look pin-sharp. HCC #275



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## TOP 10 Projectors



### 01 Sony VPL-VW550ES →£9,000 ★★★★★

For its top-range domestic SXRD beamer, Sony introduces an HDR Contrast tool that proves useful in fine-tuning its UHD Blu-ray performance. Excels with standard BD content and setup flexibility, too. *HCC #269*



NEW ENTRY

### 02 JVC DLA-X5900 →£4,000 ★★★★★

An outstanding performer at this price point. JVC's latest D-ILA beamer may lack native 4K silicon but its eShift 4K engine shows real improvement and HDR playback has been greatly boosted too. A compelling home cinema PJ. *HCC #282*



### 03 Sony VPL-HW45ES

→£2,000 ★★★★★

The most affordable model in Sony's home cinema range, the Full HD-resolution 45ES features excellent light management for a routinely cinematic image. Great value. *HCC #263*



### 04 Optoma UHD60

→£2,400 ★★★★★

An assured Ultra HD debut from Optoma – the UHD60 presents 4K Blu-rays with a pleasing contrast balance and lush detail. SDR-HDR conversion tool is best avoided, though. *HCC #277*



NEW ENTRY

### 05 Optoma UHZ65

→£5,000 ★★★★★

The asking price here reflects Optoma's addition of laser illumination (yielding improved contrast and far greater 'lamp' life) to the DLP 4K and HDR playback talents of its stablemates. *HCC #282*



### 06 Acer V7850

→£2,700 ★★★★★

One rung below Acer's largescale V9800 4K debut sits this more affordable model. Again, black levels aren't its strong point, but this runs bright, sharp and super-quiet. *HCC #276*



### 07 Epson EH-TW6700

→£1,300 ★★★★★

HDR and 4K scaling are off the menu, leaving this mid-range model to concentrate on cinematic HD images. Bright, crisp performance, plenty of tweaks, but no 12V trigger. *HCC #271*



### 08 Sony VPL-VW260ES

→£5,200 ★★★★★

Sony's base-level 4K PJ comes with a few strings attached (brightness and colour range are limited), but it's a tempter for anyone spec'ing a UHD theatre. *HCC #280*



### 09 Epson EH-TW7300

→£2,200 ★★★★★

Similar performance traits to its bigger EH-TW9300 sibling, but with reductions in max brightness (and claimed contrast). Currently the most affordable HDR model around. *HCC #269*



### 10 BenQ W2000

→£800 ★★★★★

Average black-level performance limits this model's all-round appeal, but elsewhere this Full HD DLP budget PJ catches the eye with its calibration options and detailed visuals. *HCC #257*

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## TOP 10 Speakers



**01** **Monitor Audio Gold 300AV** →£7,150 ★★★★★  
MA revamps its Gold Series and we pay serious attention. This big-ticket package excels across the frequency range, offers exquisite design and packs setup flexibility via the dipole/monopole FX surrounds. *HCC #251*



**02** **Q Acoustics 3000 5.1 Cinema Pack** →£700 ★★★★★  
A superior compact package with driver improvements over the previous 2000i series. The two-way cabinets and dual-driver sub combine to offer impressive audio for the money. *HCC #247*



**03** **KEF R Series 7.1**  
→£6,500 ★★★★★  
A 7.1 set mixing dipolar and direct surrounds, this package takes its cues from KEF's Blade and offers faultless, largescale home cinema sonics. *HCC #217*



**04** **KEF Q Series 5.1.2**  
→£3,300 ★★★★★  
KEF's revamped Q Series now offers Atmos modules for an up-to-the-minute sonic experience. Big, bold-looking speakers. Robust, immersive audio. *HCC #280*



**05** **ATC HTS7 5.1**  
→£3,500 ★★★★★  
Brit brand ATC rejigs the driver tech and neutral sound of its SCM range into a wall-mountable, flexible system perfect for discreet AV setups. *HCC #275*



**06** **Monitor Audio Silver 500 5.1**  
→£3,650 ★★★★★  
The new Silver range offers a potent EQ-able sub, sweet design, dipole surrounds and largescale, nuanced sonics. Atmos upfiring models would be nice, though. *HCC #282*



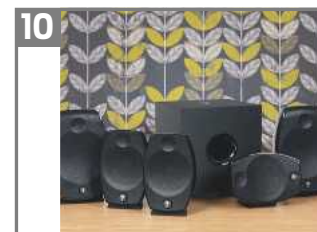
**07** **Wharfedale Diamond 11 HCP** →£800 ★★★★★  
Bookshelf speakers and 10in sub combine in a system that offers mid-range and treble finesse and a healthy dollop of boisterous bass. Fun and affordable. *HCC #279*



**08** **DALI Opticon 5.1**  
→£3,200 ★★★★★  
The Opticons employ driver designs from DALI's high-end models, and showcase a talent for involving music presentation and thrilling home cinema. *HCC #260*



**09** **Polk Signature Series 5.1**  
→£1,450 ★★★★★  
Largescale performance from a well-priced floorstanding system with slimmed-down centre enclosure. Upfront and boisterous sound; a great entertainer. *HCC #273*



**10** **Focal Sib Evo Dolby Atmos 5.1.2** →£1,200 ★★★★★  
Enjoyable-sounding and well-priced sub/sat system with Atmos upfiring in front L/R enclosures. Not the smallest 'satellite' speakers around. *HCC #276*

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Photo courtesy of Gary J. Fernandez Limited



# TOP 10 AV Receivers/AV Processors

01



## Denon AVR-X6400H → £2,100 ★★★★★

This receiver's 11 channels of power are joined by Atmos, DTS:X and integrated Auro-3D, plus HEOS multiroom integration, making it peerlessly flexible. Sound delivery is quick-footed and articulate. A superb one-box solution. *HCC #280*

02



## Arcam AVR850 → £4,500 ★★★★★

High-end seven-channel AVR marrying Class G amplification and Atmos (and future DTS:X) support with talented Dirac Live Room EQ. 11-channel pre-outs for full-fat setups. *HCC #257*

03



## Anthem MRX 1120

→ £4,000 ★★★★★

Combining Anthem's superb ARC room EQ system with 11-channel amplification makes this an essential consideration for full-spec Atmos setups. Muscular, precise sound. But no networking skills. *HCC #265*

04



## Marantz NR1608

→ £600 ★★★★★

With a smoother sound signature than before and the addition of HEOS multiroom, Marantz's 7.1-channel slim-line AVR flies the flag for living-room friendly AV. Only one HDMI out, though. *HCC #278*

05



## Sony STR-DN1080

→ £550 ★★★★★

Sony is back in the AVR game with a first Atmos model that adds worthy phantom rear speaker processing to its 5.1.2 sonics. A few UI niggles don't take much of the shine off an impressive budget buy. *HCC #277*

06



## Denon AVR-X4300H

→ £1,300 ★★★★★

Nine-channel receiver with HEOS multiroom integration and 11-channel processing (Atmos, DTS:X, plus Auro-3D as a paid-for upgrade). Great, detailed sound and foolproof usability. *HCC #267*

07



## Pioneer VSX-1131

→ £550 ★★★★★

Seven-channel model with Atmos and DTS:X support that features an overhauled remote control and UI to improve usability. Bass-rich, energetic sound. *HCC #265*

08



## Marantz SR7012

→ £1,700 ★★★★★

Nine-channel design (with 11.2 processing) for Atmos, DTS:X and Auro-3D configurations. Well-featured, and solid and sophisticated in use, but not an all-out action monster. *HCC #282*

09



## Yamaha RX-A860

→ £900 ★★★★★

Only seven channels and hindered by only three HDCP 2.2-enabled HDMI inputs, but beyond that this flexible MusicCast AVR proves a great listen, with plenty of DSP toys. *HCC #270*

10



## Denon HEOS AVR

→ £800 ★★★★★

Able to run wireless rears/sub (using HEOS models) and sporting a display-free design, this is a five-channel AVR with a different approach. One for HEOS devotees only. *HCC #276*

# TOP 5 Bonus features



## mother! The Downward Spiral

Darren Aronofsky's off-beat psychological thriller isn't for everyone, but this doc provides fascinating insight into the film's conception, planning and 16mm capture. *HCC #282*

★★★★★



## Master Class: Ridley Scott

Not as extensive as previous *Making of...* docs accompanying Scott's movies, but this 56-minute feature joining *Alien: Covenant* is well worth a watch, with a strong focus on SFX and creature design. *HCC #277*

★★★★★



## The Gorgon

Accompanying the Peter Cushing/Christopher Lee flick in Indicator's *Hammer: Volume One - Fear Warning!* boxset is a reproduction of its 1977 *House of Hammer* comic book adaptation. Read it and shriek... *HCC #280*

★★★★★



## Impressions: A Journey Behind the Scenes of Twin Peaks

*Twin Peaks* fans can delve deep into the recent series' production with this 291-minute fly-on-the-wall *Making of...* doc that gets its own BD platter. *HCC #281*

★★★★★



## It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World: Extended Cut

Not quite the original theatrical Cinerama version (202 minutes, now lost) but a 198-minute cut put together from numerous sources. A labour of love that varies in image quality. *HCC #278*

★★★★★



# TOP 10 Subwoofers



## 01 SVS SB-2000 → £600 ★★★★★

This follow up to the SB-1000 offers immense value for money. A mid-sized woofer that imbibes Blu-rays with quick, taut and potent LFE, it's a perfect introduction to what a truly good sub can accomplish. HCC #233



## 02 REL No.25 → £6,500 ★★★★★

REL celebrates its 25th anniversary in style with this 15in/1,000W premium concoction that exhibits exhilarating speed and nuance down to serious depths. Big, but beautiful. HCC #271



## 03 Bowers & Wilkins DB1D → £3,750 ★★★★★

This sequel to the DB1 moves EQ to an app and changes driver/amp design. Beautifully controlled performance with depth and detail. Gorgeous bodywork. HCC #277



## 04 JL Audio Fathom f212v2 → £6,500 ★★★★★

A second outing for JL's 2 x 12in monster, with an increase in power (3,600W) and room EQ improvements among the changes. Sounds as good as you'd imagine. HCC #261



## 05 SVS SB16-Ultra → £2,500 ★★★★★

A 16in driver and 1,500W amp combine to give SVS's flagship sealed sub real appeal. Goes low but remains tight and fast. App-assisted EQ and operation. HCC #270



## 06 REL T7i → £850 ★★★★★

Easy to house 8in sub (with 10in passive driver). Decent LF extension joined by superb speed. Wireless transmission via optional (£200) system. HCC #277



## 07 BK Electronics P12-300SB-DF → £475 ★★★★★

Bass heads can get outrageous value for money in the shape of BK's overperforming 12in sub. A front-firing model is also offered. HCC #247



## 08 Eclipse TD520SW → £3,000 ★★★★★

This twin 8in woofer, driven by ICEpower amplification, aims for ultimate speed and tone – and succeeds. Worth every penny of its asking price. HCC #249



## 09 GoldenEar SuperSub X → £1,450 ★★★★★

Four drivers squeezed into a relatively compact design and given plenty of push from a 1,400W amp. Standout traits are impact and depth. HCC #272



## 10 SVS PC-2000 → £800 ★★★★★

Cylinder construction means this 12in, 500W design can boast a large cabinet but a relatively small footprint. Good value with weighty, slamming bass. HCC #267

# TOP 5 Console games



## Uncharted: Lost Legacy

The Drake brothers are replaced by two new heroines in the latest instalment of Sony's PlayStation puzzler. The open-world element hides the relatively short nature of its story mode; HDR visuals are stunning. HCC #277

★★★★★



## Call of Duty: WWII

Eschewing the more fantastical elements of recent COD entries and giving greater emphasis to tactics and staying alive, this is a reminder of why the FPS franchise is so well loved. Superb sound FX, too. HCC #282

★★★★★



## Prey

Bethesda's FPS (and reboot of the popular 2006 title) refreshes the genre with inanimate-object-mimicking monsters, and offers plenty of gameplay variety. Good-looking, but 4K is limited to PC-based setups. HCC #274

★★★★★



## Super Mario Odyssey

Mario returns in this standout title for Nintendo's Switch console that endows its platforming fun with superior game mechanics, eye-popping visuals and a foot-tapping score. A genuine masterpiece. HCC #280

★★★★★

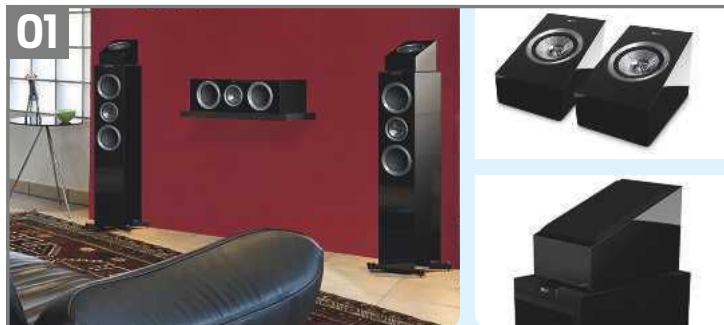


## Injustice 2

Brilliant follow up to the 2013 superhero beat-'em-up classic, letting you dole out a good kicking to the bad guys while playing as DC Comics legends. Advanced resolution via PS4, plus HDR. HCC #275

★★★★★

# TOP 10 Accessories



## 01 KEF R50 → £600 ★★★★★

KEF's Dolby Atmos-enabled reflective modules are a smart choice to beef up a system. Using the company's Uni-Q point source drivers pays dividends, enabling full-range sonics that reach deep into your cinema room. First-rate build. *HCC #252*



## 02 Yamaha WX-AD10 → £150 ★★★★★

Simple to use, unobtrusive add-on that brings MusicCast multiroom/hi-res streaming to legacy AV gear via 3.5mm/phono. Not a bad price – only available in grey, unfortunately. *HCC #274*



## 03 Amazon Echo Dot

→ £50 ★★★★★

Less impressive as a standalone speaker than its larger sibling, but more affordable. Use its 3.5mm output and Bluetooth to pair with third-party kit. Fun AI experience. A real bargain. *HCC #269*



## 04 Nvidia Shield Android TV

→ £180 ★★★★★

The Android-based streamer/gaming box gets a gentle revamp – same silicon, neater design, new features including future support for Google Assistant. Slick and easy to use. *HCC #272*



## 05 Roku Streaming Stick+

→ £70 ★★★★★

If a simple life is your aim, this content-rich, 4K/HDR-capable dongle from the streaming specialist is your friend. Idiot-proof interface and control. Good price. *HCC #282*



## 06 Amazon Fire TV (2017)

→ £70 ★★★★★

HDR playback has been added to Amazon's great-value media streamer, although the absence of an Ethernet port does niggle considering its 4K talents. Cluttered UI. *HCC #280*



## 07 Logitech Harmony Elite

→ £270 ★★★★★

Flexible and relatively easy to set up, this all-in-one remote package combines touchscreen handset and hub with smart device app. Worthwhile if you have a stacked kit rack. *HCC #256*



## 08 Naim Uniti Atom

→ £1,900 ★★★★★

Naim's gorgeous Uniti Atom combines DAC, 2 x 40W amp and network/wireless streaming for an audiophile hub. Get this HDMI upgrade model to add your flatscreen TV to the action. *HCC #278*



## 09 PSB Imagine XA

→ £350 ★★★★★

These two-way Dolby Atmos-enabled upfiring speakers are fairly chunky, but work well at creating a height layer and the £350-per-pair ticket makes them an enticing option. *HCC #264*



## 10 Xbox One X

→ £450 ★★★★★

The most advanced games console on the planet dazzles with its native 4K HDR gaming chops, but the price tag is hefty and heavyweight users may wish it came with more than 1TB of storage. *HCC #280*

# TOP 5 Blu-ray/DVD boxsets



## Legion: The Complete Season One

Brilliantly written and beautifully acted, this X-Men spin-off series is cinematic in a way that only a handful of other TV shows have ever managed – and it shines on this BD set. *HCC #280* ★★★★★



## The Wonderful Worlds of Ray Harryhausen: Vol. Two

Another trio of vintage flicks in a sumptuous package from Indicator. Here it's *Mysterious Island*, *Jason and The Argonauts* and *First Men in the Moon* given the deluxe treatment. *HCC #281* ★★★★★



## Harry Potter: 8-Film Collection [Ultra HD]

Revised audio mixes accompany each title in Warner's mega-hit franchise, and 4K visuals impress, not least the earlier flicks that buff up well. No Full HD discs included, nor extras. *HCC #282* ★★★★★



## Spider-Man: Legacy Boxset [Ultra HD]

Sam Raimi's trilogy and the more recent *Amazing...* reboot movies are united in a boxset that impresses with its AV chops, surfeit of bonus bits and fan-pleasing packaging. *HCC #281* ★★★★★



## Twin Peaks: A Limited Event Series

David Lynch's smallscreen return may not be quite what some *Twin Peaks* fans were expecting, but it remains a weird and hypnotic 18-episode show on a brilliant BD boxset. *HCC #281* ★★★★★



## TOP 10 Soundbars & Soundbases



### 01 Yamaha YSP-5600SW →£1,900 ★★★★★

With its 46 drivers (including upfiring) this premium 'bar delivers precisely-steered and immersive audio, even of the Atmos variety. Potent wireless sub and 4K-capable HDMI switching sweeten the high-end deal. HCC #254



### 02 Canton DM55 →£330 ★★★★★

Canton's smallest soundbase still delivers big sonic thrills. Twin woofers underpin clean and crisp mids and highs, and build quality is first-rate. Doddle to use. Bluetooth built-in. HCC #260



### 03 Samsung HW-K950

→£1,300 ★★★★★

Soundbar with additional wireless rears and Dolby Atmos support via four upfiring drivers. Impressively largescale performance, good connectivity. No native DTS support. HCC #263



### 04 Samsung HW-MS750 / SWA-W700

→£700/£600 ★★★★★

Upfiring drivers on this premium 'bar, but no Atmos decoding. Performance still dazzles, and the optional sub shows its merits with movie soundmixes. HCC #278



### 05 Sony HT-ST5000

→£1,500 ★★★★★

High-end Dolby Atmos-capable soundbar/sub. Upfiring elevate the soundstage (but don't wraparound). Sound quality overall is excellent, blending muscle and depth with musicality. HCC #275



### 06 Cabasse Stream BAR

→£850 ★★★★★

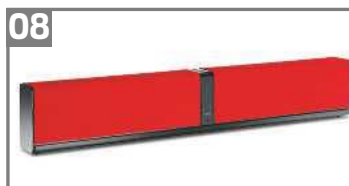
Soundbar/hi-res speaker that's blessed with real musicality, but doesn't fall short when it comes to energetic film soundtracks. HDMI in/out, but v1.4 only. HCC #269



### 07 Q Acoustics M3

→£300 ★★★★★

A 4in x 6in woofer is tucked away in the M3's eye-catching angular chassis, ensuring this well-priced soundbar has a full-range performance. Simple to use. Bluetooth streaming. HCC #271



### 08 DALI Kubik One

→£800 ★★★★★

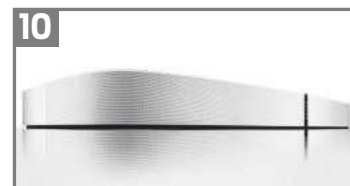
The Danish speaker brand brings a slice of glamour to your setup with this stylish soundbar. No HDMI or digital decoding but it packs a tight, lively and nuanced sound. HCC #269



### 09 Q Acoustics M2

→£300 ★★★★★

Easily accommodated in/on AV furniture, and packing HDMI ARC for a simple hookup, this BMR-driver/ built-in woofer soundbase impresses with its energetic delivery and price. HCC #279



### 10 Sonos Playbase

→£700 ★★★★★

Although this features the same foibles as the Sonos Playbar (no Bluetooth, no HDMI, no DTS), this multiroom maestro looks good and sounds good. Detailed, with naturalistic bass. HCC #273

## TOP 5 Back-catalogue Blu-rays



### Carrie: Limited Edition

A plethora of exclusive extras and a remarkable 1080p image (based on a 4K scan of the original camera negatives) make this the definitive release of the Stephen King/Brian de Palma horror classic. HCC #281

★★★★★



### The Apartment

Plenty of effort has gone into restoring this Billy Wilder comedy – the result is a new BD transfer that looks wonderfully sharp, well-contrasted and clean, considering the film's 1960 vintage. HCC #282

★★★★★



### The Wages of Fear

Few movies deliver as much edge-of-seat suspense as this 1953 thriller (based upon the same novel as William Friedkin's 1977 flick *Sorcerer*). Here it looks resplendent in monochrome 1080p. Quality extras. HCC #280

★★★★★



### Suspiria: Limited Edition

Dario Argento's 1977 classic receives a second UK Blu-ray, with a new 4K restoration making amends for the previous lacklustre effort from 2010. Plenty of worthwhile extras; 5.1 DTS-HD MA audio. HCC #282

★★★★★



### Interstellar [Ultra HD Blu-ray]

Refined 4K visuals, plus superb extras and audio ported across from the previous BD edition, make this UHD revisit of Chris Nolan's science-heavy sci-fi worth picking up. HCC #282

★★★★★

# CITY HOME CINEMAS

## *Let's Get Technical...*

4K ULTRAHD



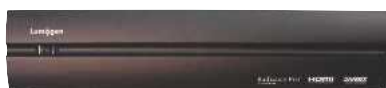
Wisdom P4i  
In-ceiling speakers.  
We have eight  
in our Cinema  
showroom.



Wisdom L2 Cinema  
surround speakers-  
There are four in our  
Cinema showroom



Datasat RA7300 power amplifier



Lumagen RadiancePro UltraHD Video Processor



Datasat RS20i audio processor

During our days of operating Commercial Cinemas we desired to present films in the best way possible choosing the best 35mm/70mm projectors with top quality anamorphic and backing lenses.

On the sound front we went with Dolby Stereo, together with surround speakers as all other formats had fallen out of favour.

So today, again we seek to create the best cinema environment with the latest 'laser' 4K projection; top of the range sound speakers and processing.

As before, we boost the surround system with better quality speakers, but advances in speaker technology take this to a whole new level.

The result is magnificent, adding to the latest cinema releases with Directors embracing greater use of the surround facilities and now with 3D overhead sound included.

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**DIGITAL PROJECTION**  
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## TOP 5 PVRs



### Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription

This triple-tuner PVR offers recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and smart TiVo functionality. If you're in a cable area, consider it

★★★★★



### Sky Q, £subscription

Sky's new top-tier product offering dazzles with its image-rich user interface, wireless multiroom skills and recording flexibility delivered by the PVR's 12 tuners. Now supports 4K content

★★★★★



### Humax FVP-5000T

Revamped menus, faster operation and tweaks to its triple-tuner engine make this the most advanced Freeview Play PVR around – and it doubles admirably as a DLNA player/media jukebox. 500GB/1TB/2TB

★★★★★



### Humax DTR-T4000, £subscription

This YouView-based PVR is required to get BT Sport's new Ultra HD channel – available to those with BT fast fibre and a BT TV sub. Easy to use and with 1TB of storage

★★★★★



### EE TV Smart Box £subscription

This quad-tuner 1TB PVR, from the mobile/broadband corp, offers innovative Replay 24-hour channel recording and great Smart device streaming. Needs more catch-up though

★★★★★

## TOP 5 Headphones



### Sony MDR-HW700DS, £800

Comfy cans supplied with an HDMI surround processor, enabling multichannel audio to be fed to a virtual 9.1-channel soundstage. The effect is superb – great for late-night listening

★★★★★



### Sony MDR-1000X, £360

Superior noise-cancelling cans with hi-res audio support via Sony's LDAC wireless transmission tech. Slick, touch-sensitive operation and healthy battery life. Fulsome sound and comfy to wear

★★★★★



### 1More MK802, £150

Ignore the bling-tastic blue or red finishes and focus on the assured sound performance from these well-priced closed-back cans. Features include wireless Bluetooth and app control (with burn-in mode). Great value

★★★★★



NEW ENTRY

### Bowers & Wilkins PX, £330

B&W adds noise-cancelling to the general spec of its previous P7 wireless cans, a welcome update for those seeking uninterrupted listening. Offers a neutral, balanced sound suited to both movies and music

★★★★★



### Audio Technica ATH-SR9, £400

45mm drivers and Audio Technica's Midpoint Mount tech deliver wide, deep, spacious sonics. Memory foam padding aids listener comfort; 3m cable should suit most AV setups

★★★★★

## TOP 5 Wireless speakers



### KEF Muo, £300

Portable Bluetooth speaker that's a cut above much of the competition. KEF's sonic knowhow results in a punchy, dynamic presentation that cherishes lossless rips. Excellent build quality

★★★★★



### Sony SRS-X11, £60

An affordable palm-sized Bluetooth speaker with internal rechargeable battery, Sony's SRS-X11 is supremely portable and sounds decent for the money. A neat little gizmo. Get two and they can work in stereo

★★★★★



### Q Acoustics BT3, £280

Bluetooth stereo pair with optical input makes a good alternative to a soundbar (there's even a subwoofer pre-out) while remaining a dab hand at music. Neat and tidy design, good price

★★★★★



### Simple Audio Listen, £400

Desktop stereo speakers with Bluetooth support, these benefit from separate tweeter/midbass units and a classy construction. Performance is well-balanced, and a subwoofer output is offered for extra bass

★★★★★



### Denon HEOS 5 HS2, £350

The mid-range multiroom speaker gets a second-gen revamp, adding welcome hi-res audio playback and Bluetooth connectivity. Gorgeous looks, boisterous, room-filling sound

★★★★★

# HOME CINEMA

Choice

## → IN THE NEXT ISSUE

**From page to screen** Think comic book movies are all about superheroes? Think again  
**4K expansion** Philips' new trio of OLED TVs  
**Pushing it to the MAX...** Chatting with IMAX about laser, 70mm and 9.1 sonics

## → REVIEWS

**Samsung Q9 4K flagship flatscreen**  
**Marantz SR8012 11-channel receiver**  
**Q Acoustics 7000 5.1 Slim speakers**  
**Acer VL7860 4K projector**  
**PLUS** News, software, opinion, comps and more

ISSUE  
#284 ON SALE  
Mar 22

CONTENTS SUBJECT TO CHANGE – BUT ONLY FOR THE BETTER



# AV Avenger

The Internet of Things may have morphed into the Intelligence of Things, but AI isn't always what it's cracked up to be, insists **Steve May**

**IF LAST YEAR'S** Berlin IFA show hinted at the role artificial intelligence will play in tomorrow's consumer tech, the recent CES in Las Vegas laid out a road map. It seems we don't just want to connect our gear in 2018, we want to interact with it. Or, at least, that's what the manufacturers are hoping.

Of the two leading voice control platforms, Google was easily the most vocal. It took over the Las Vegas monorail, shouted 'Hey Google' (not 'OK Google') from billboards all across town, and wheedled its way into a plethora of products, from TVs to transport.

Yet sometimes the message wasn't entirely clear. It turns out Google Assistant Built-in and Google Assistant-compatible are very different things. For example, LG's ThinQ AI TVs will launch in the US with Google Assistant Built-in; a microphone in the remote control allowing users to issue voice commands directly. If you want to order a pizza midway through a movie, or ask Google how many pixels make up an 8K TV image (it's 33 million plus change), you can.

However, corresponding models aimed at UK buyers will only be Google Assistant-compatible, meaning you'll need to provide your own Google smart speaker before your TV will do what it's told. Why the discrepancy? Who knows.

Amazon's Alexa, by way of comparison, had a low-key CES. Sure, there were plenty of TV brands building Alexa compatibility into screens, including Hisense, Sony and Panasonic, but there seemed to be no groundswell behind the platform. Even Chromecast was generating a bigger buzz.

That said, posh washroom brand Kohler used the show to unveil a bathroom mirror with Alexa voice control. You can ask it to tell a joke, read the news or adjust lighting and heating, all while you do your

ablutions. I'd have to run out of Blu-rays to buy before putting this on my shopping list, though.

## Smart bot plays dumb

The smart juggernaut looks unstoppable, but it was quickly apparent at CES that artificial intelligence... sometimes isn't.

LG kicked off the annual press day by trumpeting a new era for connected appliances by introducing Cloi, its own smart assistant. Cloi, we were told, would engage users on an emotional level. Unsure what spin cycle to wash your smalls? Cloi would feel your angst and offer advice. Unfortunately, the only emotion Cloi engendered was frustration. After some cheerful on-stage banter, it threw a strop, refusing to respond to questions. **'Even robots have bad days,'** quipped LG Marketing VP David VanderWaal, looking increasingly flustered. 'Cloi is not going to talk to me,' he eventually acknowledged.

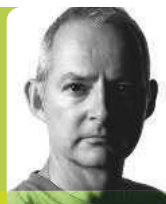
Samsung is countering with its rival smart assistant, dubbed Bixby [*who thinks of these names? – Ed*]. This will be included on QLED 4K sets, as well as Samsung's Family Hub 3.0 refrigerator. No doubt both will get along famously.

Uncharacteristically, for the first two days of CES the heavens opened. After a 116-day drought in Las Vegas, sheet rain caused local flooding. The city went on to declare January the wettest on record. And it didn't just rain outside. Buckets sprang up all around the Las Vegas Convention Centre as the roof leaked. The poor weather was also going to lead to a power outage, which famously plunged CES into total darkness for two hours. Oh the irony.

The world's biggest corps will be hoping that their smart ambitions aren't similarly washed out ■

*Do you want to interact with your AV gear?  
Let us know: email [letters@homecinemachoice.com](mailto:letters@homecinemachoice.com)*

**Steve May** is currently penning a script for a movie featuring Cloi, Alexa and Siri, called *Steve's Angels*. It will go straight to DVD





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4K  
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DOLBY  
VISION

## OPPO UDP-203



“ Image quality  
(including from  
Dolby Vision titles)  
is peerless ”



“ simply the best  
movie source  
available ”



“ You certainly  
won't find a better  
UHD Blu-ray player  
on the market ”



“ that sense of awe  
you get when  
watching 4K films is  
worth every penny ”



“ image quality  
excels ”



“ it makes 4K  
Blu-rays look more  
beautiful than  
they've ever looked  
before ”

### General

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HDMI input  
Diverse media playback via USB,  
SMB, DLNA & UPnP  
Control via IR, RS-232, IR IN, network,  
HDMI CEC and Trigger In/Out

### Video

4K HDR10 for Blu-ray and media files  
Playback of all HD formats including  
4K@60p 4:4:4  
Dolby Vision brings incredible  
brightness, colour, contrast, and  
dimensionality

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